

DISCLOSURES IN SCARLET

Carl Jacobi



\$6.00

DISCLOSURES IN SCARLET

CARL JACOBI

Disclosures In Scarlet displays the full power and range of one of America's foremost authors of imaginative fiction. A meticulous craftsman who writes with economy of prose style, Carl Jacobi offers here sixteen of his finest tales. They range in variety and mood from fantasy to the macabre, from chilling horror to the marvellous vistas opened by tomorrow's science. Often he creates his own unique blend that can not be classified.

No reader is likely to forget the occupant of *The Aquarium*, or the supernatural horror of *The Unpleasantness At Carver House* which deserves permanence as a contemporary classic in its genre. The psychological shock of *The Cocoma-lique* is as memorable as the awesome vision of *The White Pinnacle*, and the probing search in *The Random Quantity* has its counterpart in the spectacular bizarrerie of *The Player At Yellow Silence*. Whether in the brief scope of *Sequence* or the longer haunting of *The Singleton Barrier*, Carl Jacobi is always an artist at story-telling.

The author's previous two collections of tales, *Revelations In Black* and *Portraits In Moonlight*, won him eminence. *Disclosures In Scarlet* gives to the connoisseur rich new and lasting fare in its exceptional themes, the quality of its prose, and its projections beyond all known horizons.

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**DISCLOSURES
IN SCARLET**

Carl Jacobi

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IN
SCARLET**



Arkham House

1972

BOOKS BY CARL JACOBI

**Revelations in Black
Portraits in Moonlight**

**—to the memory
of my Mother . . .**

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DISCLOSURES IN SCARLET

THE AQUARIUM

Miss Emily Rhodes had been in London a little more than a year when she decided to give up her apartment and rent a house. The apartment was really quite comfortable but, as Miss Rhodes put it, she was tired of having her paints and easel next to her teacups. Accordingly, she turned to the advertisements of the *Times*.

In April she found what she was looking for. The ad read:

TO LET: On Haney Lane. Near Knightsbridge Station. 2 storeys, 12 rooms, including cnsrvtry and aq. Completely furnished. Longeway and Longeway, agents.

She read the ad a second time. The conservatory she could turn into a studio and sounded ideal, but what in the world was an aq.? The two letters meant nothing to her.

Miss Rhodes was thirty-two. A tall angular woman with black hair and metal grey eyes, she had never married for the simple reason that her painting had occupied too much of her time.

The next day she called at the offices of the agents and was ushered in to see Talbot Longeway, senior partner of the firm, a thin, cadaverous-looking individual with a completely bald pate.

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Longeway, "the house on Haney Lane. A very nice bit of property. And furnished, y'know! Would you care to see it?"

"First," replied Miss Rhodes, "would you mind telling me what is an 'aq.'?"

The agent coughed. "I'm afraid that was more or less of a joke on the part of my son who is junior member of this firm."

"But what does it mean?"

Talbot Longeway stirred uncomfortably. "The fact is 'aq.' refers to an aquarium which the former owner had constructed in the library and which has never been removed. It needn't concern you at all," he added hastily. "As a matter of fact it's a rather attractive piece even though, I will admit, excessively large."

It didn't concern Miss Rhodes. She told the agent she would like to see the property, whereupon Mr. Longeway called a cab and the two of them drove to the Haney Lane address. Miss Rhodes went through the house with a critical eye. She made certain minor objections—a suspected leak in the roof over the bedroom ceiling, a weakened rung in the balustrade, a sticky sash weight in one of the dormer windows—all of which the agent agreed to repair. After a little haggling over price she signed a lease.

The following day Miss Rhodes oversaw the transportation of her paints, canvasses and personal possessions to her new home. Then she dispatched a letter to Edith Halbin, her old friend in Bristol.

She had acquired a house, she wrote, and needed someone to occupy it with her. Now there was nothing in the way of Edith's long-contemplated move to London.

On the twelfth of April Edith Halbin, a gaunt prematurely grey woman, arrived, together with two portmanteaux, three trunks, a Siamese cat named Kuching, and four kittens.

Miss Rhodes greeted her warmly and proceeded to show her the house.

"Of course, it's much more space than we need," she said gayly, "but I like breathing room and . . . Whatever is the matter?"

Just over the threshold of the library, Edith had stopped and stood staring into the center of the room. "What's that?" she said.

Miss Rhodes frowned slightly and led the way forward like an unwilling museum guard asked to describe an unpleasant picture. The aquarium was mounted on a low platform and measured nearly ten feet in length, three in width. At first glance, it resembled a sarcophagus of antiquity with ornamental stonework at each corner and eight legs that looked like enormous claws.

The glass tank occupying the midsection of this structure was filled to the three-quarter mark with roily water into which Edith Halbin peered now with troubled eyes.

"Do you mean to say fish live in that?" she said.

Miss Rhodes shook her head. "No, there are no fish. Whoever had this

aquarium installed was a conchologist. He wanted to duplicate as closely as possible the natural conditions the specimens are found in."

"What's a conchologist?"

"A collector of shells. It's quite a study, you know. I would have put in fresh water but the valve seems to be stuck."

Edith Halbin took a step closer. An overpowering smell of putrefaction and stagnant water rose up out of the aquarium and crawled into her nostrils. With one hand she reached for the heavy cover.

"That's stuck too," said Miss Rhodes. "I shall have to have a man out to fix the thing."

In most respects, the house proved to be all that Miss Rhodes had hoped for. The conservatory jutted off from the rear and offered both good lighting and seclusion for her work. The bedrooms were large and airy.

Only the library was a disappointment. The furniture there was heavy and cumbersome and the entire room had an atmosphere of gloom and depression. The door too, a heavy oak affair, persisted in squeaking no matter how much oil was applied to the hinges; it was equipped with a latch that had a trick of locking of its own accord.

A week after they had taken up their joint residence, the two women had their first visitor. Answering the door, they found themselves confronted by a middle-aged man with a bristly moustache, greyish temples, and pale eyes behind huge bone rimmed spectacles.

"I believe this is yours," he said without preamble, handing across a very wet and bedraggled cat.

"Kuching!" cried Edith Halbin. "Wherever have you been?"

"She was on my roof and couldn't get down," explained the man. "I'm your neighbor—Lucius Bates."

While Edith took charge of the Siamese, Miss Rhodes thanked their visitor and asked him in to tea. She led the way to the library which seemed the most masculine room of the house.

"I see you've still got the aquarium," Lucius Bates said some time later. "If I were you, I'd have that thing taken out of here."

Miss Rhodes began to pour the tea.

"It takes up too much room and it's an ugly piece at best," he continued. "And personally I don't care too much for its contents."

"You mean the shells?"

Bates nodded. "They were collected, you know, by Horatio Lear, the former owner of this house. He died a year ago."

Edith Halbin, who had finished drying the Siamese with a cloth, looked up.

"Is that the Lear who was famous for his deep sea work?"

"Yes, in a diving bell. He explored the Senarbin Deep off the coast of Haiti. He was a conchologist too and brought up some rare shells from the ocean floor."

"I seem to remember," said Edith Halbin, "some unpleasantness connected with his name . . ."

Lucius Bates nodded. "That would be about his brother, Edmund. For years, there was bad feeling between the two men. It reached a climax when Edmund publicly accused Horatio of falsifying reports as to the depths he had reached in the diving bell. But they must have patched up their differences, for they continued to live here together—until one day Edmund was gone."

"Where did he go?"

"I don't really know. Horatio wasn't sure either, though he said something about his brother having interests in Haiti."

"Is this all of Horatio's shell collection?" asked Edith Halbin, nodding toward the tank.

Bates shook his head. "No, but for some reason, he destroyed most of it before his death. He suffered a heart attack, you know, while fitting that cover on the aquarium."

Next day, by means of hard, if unskillful work, Miss Rhodes managed to get the frozen valves into operation. She drained the tank and when it was emptied saw that the bottom was made up of a thick layer of greyish sand upon which the shells rested or were partially buried.

While the tank was refilling, she turned her attention to the library desk and came upon a drawer she had not opened before. Here were several file folders with the name, Horatio Lear, stamped upon them. One contained a chart labeled *Caribbean Area, Subdivision: Senarbin Deep*. There were other charts, many of them illustrated with pen and ink drawings of marine shell life.

As Miss Rhodes looked through these papers a desire to know more about the subject seized her. Across the room in a tiny alcove off from the library proper, Kuching, the Siamese, lay on a pillow, surrounded by her kittens, and watched through slitted eyes. Presumably, the alcove had been built for book-binding, cataloguing, and other related tasks, but when Edith had seen it, she had decided it was the place for her pet.

By carefully comparing some of the smaller shells from the tank with the illustrations on the charts, Miss Rhodes was able to catalogue a dozen or more

specimens including a rare bluish Stimpson's Colus, a deep water *Solariella obscura*, an albino Queen Conch and a Caribbean Vase.

Then she began to read from a typewritten paper which she found in another file folder. The manuscript seemed to be a hodge-podge of deep water scientific observations and autobiographical remarks. As she continued to read, a feeling of detachment and unease slowly stole over her. Her first impression was that Lear had been a very erudite man, completely absorbed in his work. But when she came upon several notations concerning his brother, Edmund, vitriolic with hatred, her admiration changed to a feeling of repugnance.

Miss Rhodes went to bed that night, her head filled with unpleasant thoughts. What sort of man was this, who was so obsessed with anger for his own kin that he would violate the ethics of his profession by baring his soul in a paper ostensibly devoted to science? Moreover, his hatred seemed to have no greater motive than Edmund's refusal to accept Horatio's theory concerning some forms of deep marine life. What that theory was, was not explained.

Miss Rhodes tossed restlessly, finally dozed off. About two in the morning something awakened her.

The noises of the spring night drifted in her open window. And then she became aware of a distant mewing, coming from the lower floor. She got up, put on a robe and slippers, and descended the staircase. At the library door, she clicked on the light switch and entered the room.

Directly before her Kuching stood, its back arched, its tail stiffened, its head uplifted. Even as she watched, the cat began to move forward like a creature in slow motion.

"Kuching!" called Miss Rhodes softly.

The Siamese swung and hissed, then turned uncertainly and headed for the pillow in the alcove. Miss Rhodes followed and bent down. Only three kittens were there. The fourth was missing.

She was in the midst of a search of the room when Edith Halbin entered.

"I thought I heard something," she said. "What's wrong?"

"One of the kittens is missing," replied Miss Rhodes. "It must be around here somewhere."

But a complete investigation of the room failed to reveal the animal. Then abruptly Edith Halbin pointed to one of the small windows above the wall book shelves. Her voice betrayed her shock and dismay.

"Something must have come in there and carried it off. Poor Kuching!"

Miss Rhodes followed her gaze and her lips tightened. For some reason, she did not tell her friend that height made entrance or exit by the window

impossible; nor did she show her what she saw now by the table midway across the room—the horrible tuft of blood-clotted fur, almost invisible in the shadows against the dark of the floor.

Next day, the two women embarked on a project which they hoped would lighten the mood into which they had both lapsed—the painting of Edith Halbin's portrait. Miss Rhodes, genuinely concerned about her friend, reasoned that sitting for a picture would at least take her away from Horatio Lear's book collection for which the Bristol girl had displayed a strange and unhealthy interest.

To Miss Rhodes, everything about the collection was unhealthy—from the ancient mouldering covers to the quasi-factual, half-mystical context, steeped in folklore and superstition. There was, for example, a copy of Gantley's *Hydrophinnae*, containing some of the most hideous and horrible illustrations she had ever seen. There was a first edition of *Dwellers in the Depths*, by Gaston Le Fe who, the foreword stated quite blandly, had died insane. And there was a pirated manuscript of the German *Unter Zee Kulturen*, all copies of which had supposedly been destroyed in the seventeenth century.

It was the cumulative effect these books had upon Edith Halpin, that worried Miss Rhodes. She herself had spent an hour with the volumes, and had come away all but overwhelmed with loathing and shattered nerves.

But perhaps the portrait would change all that . . .

Against her better judgment, Miss Rhodes consented to Edith's request that she do the portrait against the background of the aquarium. Try though she would, however, to keep the likeness of the container of shells subdued, it persisted, by some trick of pigment or brush stroke, in standing forth in parallel importance to the figure in the painting.

Moreover, the effect of water in the tank was not at all realistic. A heavy shadow was concentrated here which no amount of reworking seemed able to lighten.

After two weeks, the portrait was done. Seeking relief from the finished task, Miss Rhodes strolled into the little yard behind the house, unmindful of the mizzling rain that dripped from a leaden sky. Presently, she became aware of a man on a stepladder on the adjoining property. It was Lucius Bates. She crossed over and bade him good morning.

"But a wet gloomy one," he said, resting his saw in the branch of the plane tree he had been trimming. "It seems one bad day follows another."

They exchanged idle talk. "You still haven't got rid of that stone monstrosity, I see," he said.

"Monstros—? Oh, you mean the aquarium! But why . . .?"

Bates adjusted his over-sized spectacles. "You have a rather nice library. That oversized tank is out of taste. I've often wondered why Horatio put it there in the first place."

"Presumably because it was close to his place of work."

"Fiddlesticks! I should think a dry table would have been as good a place to keep his shell specimens on. But then, Horatio was a little touched."

Miss Rhodes was going to mention Lear's queer papers and books when she thought better of it. Instead she said, "in what way—touched, I mean?"

Bates smiled slightly. "Well, for one thing, his pet theory about a form of undersea life. He had some wild idea that somewhere in the unplumbed ocean depths there exists a highly developed species of mollusk that is capable of emulating certain characteristics of those life forms it devours.

"That was his original theory. He embroidered it from time to time, and in his last years he grew pretty fanciful about it—got it all mixed up with demonology and folklore. Toward the end Horatio went all out in this mystic fol-de-rol, talked about making sacrifices to his conch and all that rot—it was one of the things the brothers quarreled about. I overheard them more than once—Edmund ridiculing Horatio's beliefs and Horatio calling down all kinds of maledictions on Edmund.

"After Edmund had left, I asked Horatio on one occasion where his brother had gone. He just laughed and said Edmund went to prove—or disprove—his theories. 'He's gone far deeper into the subject than he thought he'd ever go—far deeper,' he said. And of course Edmund never did come back. I can't say I blame him. Who'd want to come back to live with a man clearly on the distaff side of sanity? Nothing was ever heard from Edmund after that."

"Curious," said Miss Rhodes, who had listened with vague disquiet. "How old a man was Horatio Lear?"

"Old enough to know better. Somewhere in his fifties, I'd say." Bates got down the step ladder and faced her. "Seriously though, Miss Rhodes," he said gravely, "if I were you, I'd have that aquarium taken out."

To Miss Rhodes' disappointment, the painting of the portrait had little effect on Edith Halbin. Her friend continued to haunt the library, lost in the conchologist's deep-sea world of print. The more fantastic, the more macabre the books and manuscripts, the more absorbed she became in them. When she went about her everyday household tasks, she did so mechanically, her mind obviously far removed from work. Yet Miss Rhodes refused to become unduly alarmed. Edith had always been impressionable, and Miss Rhodes reasoned

that her friend would return to normalcy as soon as her present preoccupation had spent itself.

It was about this time that the sound began. It began as a subdued murmur, with only her vague awareness at first, so low that she took it to be another manifestation of the high blood pressure which had mildly troubled her for some time. Day by day it continued sporadically, now growing, now lessening in intensity; at times it would be gone and she thought with relief she was rid of it. Then it would return louder and more persistent than before. When she asked Edith if she heard anything unusual, the Bristol girl only looked blank.

The physician in Harley Street she finally consulted gave her a routine examination. "I can find nothing wrong with you," he said. "The auditory canals seem normal in all respects. A murmuring sound, you say?"

Miss Rhodes nodded. "Yes. A low throbbing as if . . . well, as if a large hollow shell were placed against the ear and held there . . ."

He looked a little puzzled, went into a vague discourse on psycho-somatic symptoms and ended by prescribing a mild sedative.

April slipped into May, the sound continued, and Miss Rhodes' companion grew more restive. She became careless in her dress and forgetful in her speech. What was worse, she took to sleep-walking. On three successive nights Miss Rhodes, always a light sleeper, was awakened by the sound of steps on the uncarpeted floor of the outer corridor. The last night, tiptoeing to her door she had seen Edith walk slowly, stiffly past and with robot-like movements descend the staircase to the ground floor. At the entrance of the library in the dim glow of the night light she paused a moment before entering.

Miss Rhodes stood by her door hesitantly. She had read somewhere that to awaken a sonambulist in the midst of its meandering might induce shock. Nevertheless, she couldn't let her friend move about in this condition at random. She hurried down the stairs.

The library was in total darkness, but when she switched on the light, the sight she saw held her rigid for an instant. Edith had drawn up a chair in the middle of the room and sat there stiffly erect staring at the aquarium. Her hands hung at her sides; her head was slightly tilted downward like a bird watching.

There was something quietly horrible about the taut posture, her sightless concentration. Miss Rhodes touched her on the shoulder. She said gently, "you must have dozed off. I told you not to read so much. Come to bed."

It was a curious fact that the sleep walking incident marked the end of that

chain of events which had so disturbed Miss Rhodes. As if by magic, Edith roused herself from the mood which had gripped her since coming to this house. And, as if by magic, the murmuring sound dwindled and finally passed away. The very weather underwent a change, overcast days giving way to those of brightest sunshine.

Yet deep within Miss Rhodes was the conviction that it was the pause before the storm.

On the night of the nineteenth of May, she was working in the conservatory-studio, doing a new painting. For an hour Edith had silently watched her friend wield her brushes. Then she rose to her feet.

"I have some letters to write," she said.

Miss Rhodes nodded, absorbed in her work. Across on the far wall the pendulum clock pushed its ticks through the quiet. The air was sultry. Outside a light rain was beginning to fall, and the smell of wet earth drifted through the open window.

The painting, a still life, was going well, far better than the portrait of Edith, and Miss Rhodes worked with enthusiasm. Perhaps a half hour passed before she became conscious of the silence of the house. Silence pervaded the conservatory like a living entity, through which the faint hushing of her brush strokes sounded unnaturally loud. Frowning a little, she went to the connecting door and stood there, listening. There was utterly no sound in the house—no creaking of a chair, no rustling of paper, nothing. A little chill of unease began to move up her spine.

"Edith!" she called. "Are you all right?"

Her voice went bounding down the corridor to stir up a fusillade of echoes but brought no reply.

Miss Rhodes put down her brush and pallet and headed for the library. She reached the entrance and halted uncertainly. The door was locked. She knocked.

"Edith!" she called. "Let me in."

That same ringing silence answered her. She pounded on the door.

"Edith! Why don't you answer me?"

Her unease gave way to alarm. She turned and ran down the corridor to the kitchen where a master key hung from a hook on the wall. A few moments later, she had unlocked the library door and entered the room.

At first glance the room looked empty. She advanced several steps. Then her eyes were drawn to the floor.

She stood there for a long minute, staring down. A dribble of saliva ran

from the corner of her mouth. Her throat went dry. She began to tremble with shock.

Edith Halbin lay there, limp on the floor—horribly lifeless. Miss Rhodes recognized her by her clothing, nothing more. For what had been Edith's face and head had been partially devoured. And the aquarium no longer showed a milky grey solution, but was now a less cloudy but sickening pink, through which she could just make out the outlines of a great conch, and near it the white bones of a human being—Miss Rhodes knew intuitively whose they were. Most hideous of all were the marks on the floor—still wet red convolutions extending from the aquarium to Edith Halbin's body and back to the tank again—marks that might have been made by some crawling thing, satiated and slobbered with blood.

Numb with shock and horror, Miss Rhodes stumbled from the room and the house into the rain outside, ran down Haney Lane and Brompton Road, southeast toward the Embankment. She moved into Basil Street and came at last to Cadogan Square—and to herself. She stopped running, threw back her head and began to scream.

THE PLAYER AT YELLOW SILENCE

He came out of nowhere like a summer storm and like thunder he went bowling down the fairways, breaking record after record. A gallery materialized about him, though this was no tournament, and word flew ahead into the clubhouse that an unknown marvel was burning up the course.

Someone recalled his name from the register: Forbes—Joseph Forbes. But nobody had seen him before.

On the thirteenth, a 1,325-yard hole, with a dogleg to the right, he took a number-five trajectory-iron and, after a moment's gaze through the telescopic, lofted his shot over a stand of cedars. He made an easy birdie. On the fifteenth it was thought he was too short, but the automated ball rolled down the incline and trickled across the green to drop into the cup—for an ace. He was 58 at the end of the second nine. Though the day was hot and humid, he looked fresh as a daisy.

I called the newspapers myself. As top pro at Yellow Silence I thought I owed it to the press boys to put them on to a good thing. Joseph Forbes was sitting in a fan-back chair on the clubhouse veranda when the sports writers arrived. He answered their questions in a quiet abstract manner, as if he were thinking of something else.

"No, I can't recall that I ever made an ace before. Yes, I like the Yellow Silence course very much."

There was a melodious quality to his voice that made me think of distant cattle bells in the summer dusk.

One of the newsmen edged closer. "And what do you think of the Yansis, Mr. Forbes?"

Now *there* was a stupid question to put to a player. There are no Yansis

courses in Australasia or in any other part of Earth, for that matter. Yansis don't go in for self-enjoyment. But ever since their "migration" from the Monoceros galaxy in '84 they have attempted, bit by bit, to take over this planet.

It was the prize case of infiltration and, as we know, it very nearly succeeded. When they first arrived in their spaceships they were so benign in manner and appearance nothing suspicious was thought about them. They seemed the epitome of friendship.

But you know the terrible struggle that followed. For twenty years now, since their defeat and retreat to their antipodes stronghold, they have been content to remain on earth and lick their wounds, biding their time. Now, day by day, they are becoming bolder again.

Nevertheless it was a stupid question to put to a player.

Whatever he thought, Forbes made no reply.

Next day the stranger showed definitely that he was no fluke. In a driving rain, in slicker jacket and waterproof cap, he went around the upper eighteen in fifty-nine. And, mark you, Yellow Silence is no easy course. Laid out in what formerly was a Chippewa reservation, it presents a labyrinth of magnetic traps, fairway warps and dimensional checkmates that all but confuse the average player.

The evening papers were out when I got back to the clubhouse. The sports pages were full of the man. There was grimmer news too. The papers bristled with war rumors. Demands, warnings, threats on both sides. Political tempers were at the breaking point. War was imminent, the papers said. It was only a matter of time.

About five o'clock of that same day what threatened to be major tragedy occurred in the clubhouse. Two robot caddies carried in a young girl who had been run down by a speed maniac as he roared out of the parking area. Her face was white as wood ash and there was a terrible wound on her temple where the skull was all but crushed in. We stood around helplessly with that feeling of awe that sweeps over one when confronted by sudden disaster. The ambulance doctor finished his examination.

"She's gone," he said.

And then the crowd parted a little as Forbes pushed his way through, and bent over the silent figure.

He gazed into her eyes for a long moment. He drew from his pocket a small pyxis with a hinged cover. Inside was a miniature panel of crystal keys and what appeared to be a minute oval of silver tape that whirled rapidly. His

fingers touched one of the keys, then moved across to drift over the girl's face. The tape slowed, then sped faster. A soft hum issued from the box.

Moments later a flush entered the pallid flesh. One of the eyelids fluttered almost imperceptibly. Then her lids moved and she sat up with a groan while the ambulance doctor stared as if he had seen a ghost.

The wound on her temple seemed to fade away.

Without any trouble the newspapers made a story out of that, too, and almost overnight Forbes became a legend. His easy stance and supple gait were watched with envy and his beautiful electronic clubs were examined and stared at. Quiet and unassuming, he seemed to possess a subtle magnetism that attracted friends instantly.

But it was several weeks before he played again. Meanwhile he drifted in and out of the clubhouse, sitting by the window, staring out over the course. Then, two days before the Trans-Federatal was scheduled to open at Yellow Silence, he joined a threesome of Tony Loretto, Chad Hartridge and Dick Benbow who had come ahead on their tournament tour to try out the Silence course. Loretto was top pro in the Federated States and Hartridge and Benbow had grabbed first and second winnings in the Matto Grosso Open earlier in the year. Their disgust was evident as they left the eighteenth and compared scorecards.

"The man's a wizard," Loretto said. "He didn't miss a putt."

The summer wore on. With the tournament coming on and with the accompanying end-season crowds, I was kept pretty busy those hot days of August. As a matter of fact I didn't see much of Forbes again until the Carewe incident took place.

You might say Julian Carewe was the father of Yellow Silence. He was responsible for getting the land grant from the government and he had designed and laid out the course. Carewe had been a "Three star" player himself until he had contracted Paldring's Disease which had left him confined to a wheelchair.

He had his wheelchair drawn up beside the settee occupied by Forbes when I entered the clubhouse lounge toward the close of what had been a blazing, humid day. The two men appeared to be in animated discussion. Carewe was talking earnestly and from time to time pointed to his useless legs.

I chose a chair in the corner of the room and picked up a magazine. From time to time my eyes drifted across the room toward the two men. Carewe seemed to be pleading with Forbes in an argumentative sort of way.

Presently Forbes nodded, reached into his pocket and drew out that same

small box. Even at that distance I could see what appeared to be cuneiform writing on its outer surface. He moved a small dial in the box, lifted a tiny staff and proceeded to run it back and forth over Carewe's calf and thighs. A light flickered in the box—red, then green. Presently he restored the box to his pocket, rose and walked away.

Carewe sat in his wheelchair, an expression of puzzlement on his face. An instant later he braced his hands on the armrests and clutched there a moment. His feet came down to support him; he took a tentative step.

And then he was walking across the lounge floor, step by step to the veranda.

Next day the club was abuzz with Carewe's miraculous recovery. That it was complete was attested by his playing around the practice nine and doing it without aid of any kind. Color entered his face, a smile supplanted his usual scowl and his air of confidence returned. As for me, I was so disturbed by what I had seen I almost forgot about the business-and-membership banquet scheduled for the following night. I planned to show a number of instruction slides on the handling of the new double-mashie which had been approved for tournament play by the NGA.

The dinner was the usual affair. A financial report was read and an election of officers was held.

Saved for the last was the eulogizing of this man called Forbes and his shattering of course records.

But then, like an electric charge passing across the tables, came the whispered rumor: Forbes was an alien. An undesirable. Even now he was under security investigation in Federation City.

In normal times, of course, such gossip would have been relegated to the scrap-heap where it belonged. But these weren't normal times. These were days of planetary patriotism and fear-charged suspicion. The Yansis were on the verge of war. The Yansis were known to have a highly technocratic culture on their home planet. Perhaps they had evolved a method whereby their individual identity could be hidden beyond visual detection.

It's a damned shame, I thought. The man is no more an alien than I am. Yet even I had to admit there was an oddness about him that puzzled me.

Nor was my curiosity relieved the next night when I returned to the clubhouse to do some remodeling work, I had promised to give a member's trajectory-wood my personal attention and to have it ready the next morning. Climbing the veranda steps, I saw Forbes sitting in the gloom.

"Hullo," I said. "It's a fine night."

He answered and I passed on into the clubhouse. I found the club to be repaired, got some sandpaper and a bolin-screwdriver and went to work. Perhaps five minutes passed; then the sound of footsteps came through the open window. In the glow of light from within Forbes passed by, carrying his bag.

I laid down the club and made my way down the corridor to the veranda in time to see a shadowy figure step onto the first tee. He bent down, placed something on the turf; not an ordinary ball but a yellowish ovoid that gleamed with a kind of phosphorescence of its own.

As if he were doing the most ordinary thing in the world, he addressed the ball, drove it into the pitch-blackness of the fairway. An arching streak of orange marked the passage of the ball as if some of its radiant pigment had embossed its path against the night sky. As if it were some kind of signal to the stars above.

Forbes picked up his bag of clubs and strode off in the direction of the first hole. I went down the veranda steps and followed.

The arching streak of light remained over the fairway like a glowing ribbon. And when I approached the green the glow combined with the gleaming ball to illumine a wide area. I moved unseen into a tree's shadow and there I watched him select a putter and silently tap the ball into the cup. He seemed to be playing idly, to be waiting for something.

The second hole was a repetition of the first.

But at the third hole Forbes opened a zippered compartment of his bag and drew out a collapsible rod with tripod legs. He also took out a small quadrant with a double row of coronium keys. He placed the quadrant next to the rod and began to tune the instrument.

Slowly a mist flowed outward from the pelan, rising to form a vague screen-like curtain between the tree boles. A face began to take form there.

It was the face of a patriarch. The white hair fell away from the crown of the head and the eyes, under heavy brows, seemed to glitter like shards of shiny metal. It spoke but the voice was pitched too low in the sonic scale for me to understand.

"They are basically good, needing only guidance," Forbes said finally. "With your permission I will stay longer."

With that, the mist-screen seemed to melt away. Forbes returned the quadrant and the collapsible rod to his bag and headed back toward the clubhouse.

In the weeks that followed interest in war news preempted all other

activity. An ultimatum had been delivered by the Yansis to Federation City, following what they declared to be an insulting diplomatic incident. Now they were insisting on more demands. Wherever you went people stood in groups, discussing the situation. War was inevitable, they said. Labor tunnels were doubly guarded with security restrictions. Fallout compartments were serviced. Automated trunkways were turned back to manual roads and way-stations were camouflaged. Federation City prepared to move underground.

The newspapers had a field day, going all-out in their vilification of the Yansis. The high-speed draft began to take men of military age and presently you noticed it on the course, older men making up a greater percentage of the players.

In the midst of all this the sports pages carried one bit of news that had nothing to do with the threatened conflict. The old Southview course, twenty miles down the trunkway from Yellow Silence, was being renovated and scheduled to reopen as a private links under the new name of Tranquillity Heights. Funny name for a course I thought. And then did a double take when I read the name of the promoter—Joseph Forbes.

A few days later I drove over to give the place the once-over. I had expected temporary greens, winter rules and hazards in the process of construction. Instead I found one of the most beautifully laid-out courses I had ever seen: the greens composed of the new magnetic silver-bent; the water-hazard a mirror-like lake that sparkled in the sunlight and fairways tailored to perfection.

There were lattice bridges over picturesque streams, robotic caddies waiting at the first tee and an inviting plastic and glass clubhouse with an automatic ramp leading up from the playing level. A tremendous amount of work had been put on the course and it seemed incredible that it could have been completed in so short a time.

My presence was spotted. The door to the clubhouse opened and Forbes came down the ramp to meet me.

"Welcome to Tranquillity Heights," he said. "Do you want to play a round?"

I shook my head.

"What's that thing?"

I pointed to a narrow concrete structure with a metal antenna above it.

"It's a Balance-beam. Contestants pass through it and are evened-up to a common denominator of skill, strength and psychological endurance. Come along and meet my assistants."

Forbes' assistants sat about a long table in a clubhouse second-floor room, eating their meal. Forbes called names. Each man nodded as his was spoken. The wine—pre-Atomic 44, I guessed—was of excellent quality. Forbes drank from a goblet.

Presently I voiced a question: "You've quite an investment here. Do you expect to realize a profit?"

"The greatest profit in the world," he said. "The profit of peace."

"I don't understand."

He was silent a moment.

"Did it ever occur to you to wonder why a man plays a relatively simple contest, bolstered with only minor technological advancements? Principally because golf is about the last participation sport. Most others have lapsed into spectator contests. You know that with the coming of com-automation and the subsequent increase of leisure, nonprofessional physical ability has fallen out of fashion. Hampton's *Second Cycle of Life* was found to rest upon a minimum of cardiac strain."

"So?"

"So the elemental conflict—war. An outgrowth of tribal struggle and in turn a development of individual or family grievance. Today the Yansis are our enemies, cloaked in fear and suspicion. I propose to reduce the differences—between."

"Are you trying to tell me you expect to settle the conflict between us and the Yansis by such a simple and unsophisticated device?" I said.

"Yes."

"It'll never work," I said. "There's too much at stake." |

"I think it will. Each of the factions has been contacted and has agreed to send players. It won't make any difference if they choose professional athletes or not. Once they pass the beam they will be at the same level."

He broke off.

Outside two copters had settled down before the clubhouse entrance and a dozen or more figures stepped out. They were Yansis. Their wafer skulls were concealed by blue turbans and their violet eyes were hidden behind dark glasses.

Stiff as sticks, they marched up the ramp and strode into the lobby where they were met by Forbes.

I nodded goodbye and passed outside.

But as I headed down the trunkway a question hammered at me. Why had there been no security watch over the Yansis representatives? With the two

races at sword's points—it seemed strange that no precautions had been taken by either side.

I drove down the trunkway and the farmland of early Autumn stretched away on all sides. Or was it farmland? The fields seemed to be lying fallow, untilled. Nor were any farmhouses in evidence. Abruptly it struck me that I had not passed a single car, that the road was in fact deserted.

Ten minutes later I was staring, stunned, at the sign above the gate. I was back where I had started.

A figure stepped out of the shoulder bushes and leaned in the car window. It was Benjamin, one of Forbes' assistants.

"It's all right," he said. "We didn't know it was you. Thought you were still on the course."

"I must have taken the wrong turn," I said. "But I don't remem—"

"It's all right. Just keep going straight down the trunkway."

He waved me on.

The newspapers carried nothing about the impending tournament at Tranquillity but rumors about the Yansis continued. In their Australasian lair they were said to be making ready a weapon a hundred times more frightful than the missile-missile.

Then a new series of events occurred to demand journalistic attention. In twelve cities, on twelve outstanding links, a strange duplication of the phenomenon that had taken place at Yellow Silence transpired. A stranger played with a fantastically low score and in some unorthodox way performed some unusual therapy. What was more important, however, was the society these strangers organized, a national quasi-theology attracting members by the score.

The first chance I got, impelled by curiosity, I drove back to the Heights, arriving in time to see a foursome made up of two of Forbes' assistants and two turbaned Yansis drive for the first hole.

I followed them.

The game ended with the Yansis far in the lead. The aliens were laughing triumphantly as they left the eighteenth hole and made their way back to the clubhouse. I met Forbes on the veranda.

"I want to thank you," he said, "for not betraying my confidence. The press, though, is getting more difficult to hold back."

"The tournament, I take it, is not proving a success."

"Why do you say that?"

"I followed the play today," I said, "and you could have cut the silence with a knife. You can't change antagonism to rivalry."

"You forget all Yansis don't speak our language."

"You could have used a Transladian."

"If they agreed to, yes. So far the tournament is a draw. We're even-up in the number of holes played and the number won."

I thought that over.

"Who plays next?"

"I do," replied Forbes. "And Ganeth Zerl, the Yansis premier."

That evening one paper, the *Times-Standard*, broke the story of the war-settlement tournament. As a result my telephone was busy with calls for information about the player who had master-minded it and who had broken the records at Yellow Silence.

At nine o'clock the next morning I drove again through the gates of the new course. Judging by the number of cars in the parking area a goodly number of people had seen the *Times-Standard* story.

Ganeth Zerl was waiting on the first tee when I joined the gallery. How different was this Yansis, I thought, from his predecessors of twenty years before when, smiling in pseudo-friendship, they had emerged from their spacecraft and stepped for the first time on the soil of Earth. He was tall, a saturnine individual clad in loose-fitting green coveralls and the latest style sports boots, polished to the nines. His wafer head, a sensitive subject to most of his race, was uncovered and thrust out in surly defiance.

The gallery moved back obediently as Zerl selected a heavy wood with a gyroscopic bang-plate and teed off. His ball shot out a thousand yards over the fairway and came to a bounding stop as a robot caddy ran out to mark the distance.

Forbes' ball also split the fairway.

And now an indefinable strangeness seemed to settle over the two players. The gallery sensed it and followed them in silence. With apparent ease Zerl took the first, second and third holes. His eyes began to glitter.

But Forbes came back to win the sixth and seventh.

At the tenth Zerl's ball sliced into the rough and the magnetic grass wrapped itself about it, forming a nest that defied disentanglement. Right away the Yansis player demanded permission to drop another ball on the grounds that the obstacle was not a natural one.

Forbes took the eleventh with a double-fulcrum approach that reached the green beautifully.

The game went on.

Over the emerald grass, past water hazards and sand traps they went, oblivious to the milling spectators, pausing only to wait for the hushed conversation to die down. A film of perspiration gathered on their brows; they wiped their hands repeatedly.

I was witnessing, I suddenly realized, no mere tournament but a struggle between elemental forces for the highest of stakes—for a race against genocide. As I gazed into the wan sunlight which had supplanted the overcast I got the impression that we weren't on the links at all but in a great rotunda where sat a hundred or more judges in black robes.

It was even-up as they climbed to the eighteenth tee. Both drove with the utmost care and precision.

And then a sudden murmur of excitement swept through the gallery. Forbes' ball had been driven directly into the *Flux*.

The *Flux*—Robinson's Dervish—was a hazard I had never seen before. Legal under NGA rules but seldom used, it consisted of a dimensional whirling cone that sprang into existence when the ball entered its field. It was also a miniature timeslide, a viewport into the problematical future.

Forbes' jaw set as he made his way down to the whirling cone in which the air appeared to be staggered in faults, one over the other. He hesitated only long enough to select a club. Then, as if he were merely passing through a doorway into another room, he stepped into the *Flux*.

The staggered air enveloped him and he disappeared. As I stood gazing, I was momentarily aware of a great rush of matter, blurred and amorphous, hurtling by. It—became a procession of people, like the view of a parade from the window of a speeding train, all of them in jubilation and in ecstasy. At the parade's end stretched an open field upon which were piled articles of ordnance and armament—all being scrapped and destroyed by atomic fire.

The scene faded. Moments passed. Then Forbes' ball came bounding out of the *Flux* and an instant later he followed. But even as the ball sailed past me I saw that it was overclubbed. It flew across into the rough flanking the opposite fairway.

Forbes had lost.

A wave of disappointment swept over me.

Yet I saw an expression of triumph enter his eyes as he completed his anticlimactic play on the eighteenth green and fed his scorecard into the slot. He entered the Balance-beam after turning the control to reverse, then stepped out again. He climbed slowly partway up the ramp, where he stood facing the silent, expectant gallery.

"My friends," he said in his melodious voice, "you may think what you have just seen is failure for Earth. In reality it is victory. Man's inability to understand and appreciate the thought and viewpoint of another life, no matter how alien that life may be has always been a stumbling block in the progress of his culture."

He paused and smiled slightly.

"You see, the very acceptance by one culture of peace with another culture by way of amicable competition constitutes a victory in itself. And the ability to accept defeat in such a culture-contest may also be regarded as a triumph."

"And now the tournament is finished. I have enjoyed my stay with you but I must leave."

He made a gesture of farewell, turned and strode down the ramp. He headed diagonally across the fairways. I watched his figure grow smaller and smaller, moving over the bright green sward toward the hazard lake that lay athwart his path. But for some reason he did not turn either way along the shore. Instead, as the water cast a haze of reflection in my eyes, I fancied I saw him move directly forward, walk out on its wind-rippled surface.

THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT CARVER HOUSE

At the junction of Highway 7 and County Road 16 the motor coughed and died and the car coasted to a halt. For several minutes I ground on the starter, vainly fiddled with the ignition key. But it was evident that the crash had caused more damage to the motor than I had supposed. I said to my sister,

"I'll carry you the rest of the way. I can have the car picked up in the morning."

I lifted her in my arms, climbed a wire fence with some difficulty and set off across the fields, walking briskly over the uneven ground, gradually slowing down as her dead weight made itself felt. In the full moonlight the summer countryside stretched beyond me like a smocked-edged quilt. Rolling hills and lush farmland made a blue patchwork of light and darker shadow. Even with the numbing pain at the back of my head, the intermittent dizziness, and the dull hypnosis of shock from the accident, I couldn't help but be aware of the beauty of the night.

"You'll feel better," I said, "when you're in your bed and had a cup of strong tea."

A quarter of an hour later I topped a last hill in the treeless meadow and came within view of Carver House. It stood there below me, a white box-like rectangle with tall windows refracting the moonlight, a crumbling brick wall enclosing the grounds dotted with life-size statuary. Carver House, the only home I had known for thirty years.

I carried my sister up to her room, second floor back, helped her onto the bed and put a blanket over her, for although the month was August, the night air carried a perceptible chill. I bathed her face with warm water and left a carafe and a glass on the night table

"If you want anything, call me," I told her, "I'll brew some tea later."

Then I went into the bathroom and looked at my face in the mirror. It was a study in horror, the flesh ashen grey, streaked with dirt and caked with blood. I couldn't see the wound at the back of my head but touching it sent a sharp pain through my skull and a feeling of nausea in the pit of my stomach. I applied a mild disinfectant and bandaged it as well as I could and then, somewhat unsteadily, went down stairs to the study. Five minutes later steps sounded outside and someone knocked at the door.

It was Sheriff Barson, an insufferable busybody who, since his election, I barely tolerated. Barson was a small stubby man whose mild appearing features belied his physical strength and endurance. He was smoking a cigar.

"A bit late for you, isn't it?" I said. "I hope this isn't a duty call."

"Yes, it is," he said in his nasal voice, dropping unasked into a chair. "How come you left the scene of an accident without reporting it?"

"Because it wasn't an accident. Not in the exact sense of the word anyway. I ran into the side of a train, not into another car. No one was hurt, and the only damage was to my machine."

"You don't look it," Sheriff Barson said, glancing at my head bandages.

"Oh, I did get a little rap on the head. It's nothing."

"The engineer reported seeing a woman in your car . . ."

"My sister. Her injuries are superficial too."

The sheriff relit his cigar, carefully dropped the burnt match in an ash tray. His watery eyes roved the room, returned meditatively to me. "About insurance . . ."

"There won't be enough damage to put in a claim," I said irritably. In my present mood I was anxious to be alone.

Barson nodded and got to his feet. "Just the same I think I'll tell Doc Evans to stop by. You never can tell about these car accidents."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" I snapped. "If I need a doctor, I'm still able to use a telephone."

He shrugged, went out the door and got in his station wagon. I watched him drive away, then went back upstairs to my sister.

"The sheriff was here. I told the old butinsky we didn't want a doctor."

She lay there, a slight figure, prematurely grey for her forty years, with prominent cheek bones and wide set eyes. The shock of the accident was still upon her and, never a garrulous person anyway, she lacked the strength to reply.

In the morning I called the garage in Victoria and made arrangements to

have my car picked up and repaired. After such a brilliant night, it was a somber, melancholy day. Wind-driven rain pelted the windows and the wrought iron gate of Oak Ridge Cemetery directly across the road was barely discernible through the mist. But at intervals the rain would let up, and then I could see the scant few tombstones and beyond them, diminishing to the vanishing point, the tracks of the M. N. and S. railroad, tracks which had caused such a controversy in recent weeks. For it was the cemetery's close proximity to trackage that had made it suddenly industrially desirable, whereas other adjacent land in either direction was fit for plant erection only at considerable expense. A group of men in Chaska, the county seat, wanted to sell the land to a tax-reduction-seeking concern in Minneapolis. I was definitely against such a sale. In the first place I didn't want a factory that close to my house. But it was the defilement of the graveyard that disturbed me. Some of the burial plots dated back almost a hundred years and of these reburial in new grounds would be of course impossible.

Standing before the window, I realized that I had come to like the view of that rusting gate and the irregular rows of monuments. There was something homely macabre about it that was in harmony with Carver House and grounds. Carver House had been built before the turn of the century, a faithful example of Americanized Victorian architecture with gingerbread scroll-work and railings and a box-like facade. The last owner before I had taken over had been a stonecutter by trade, and he had left examples of his work scattered about the grounds. There was a large fountain (with no water connection) the basin of which was supported by three stone cupids, one of them so crudely carved the face seemed to be of an old man. Similar grotesque images flanked either side of the lane that led from the road to the house. A statue of a Civil War soldier stood in silent contemplation at each corner of the property. And there were several stone benches scattered about. In the past there had been times when I had looked upon these carvings with an acute depression of spirit, but now I couldn't understand how I ever had such a feeling. Even with the numbing pain at the back of my head I felt strangely at ease and at peace with the world.

Shortly after noon I took a book of poems from the study up to my sister's room and read to her for an hour. Though she didn't say so, I think she preferred *Thanatopsis* to the other verses. Then I was called downstairs by the garage man, returning my car. I paid him and drove him as far as the highway where he could pick up a bus back to Victoria.

On the way back to Carver House I saw that there was another new grave

in the cemetery. That made three in the last month, more than there had been in the last ten years. With the gloom of the day I thought of *Grey's Elegy*, with the wind sighing through the wet cedars in lieu of "the lowing of cattle." Overhead a hundred sheen-black starlings perched motionless on the telegraph wires. As I turned up the lane, it occurred to me that if I could return my sister to the scene of the accident and demonstrate to her how simple carelessness on my part had been responsible for the crash some of the shock which still clung to her would be dissipated. When the proposal was made she hesitated, then somewhat doubtfully consented. Accordingly I helped her into a light weight coat and out to the car. "The best way to end a feeling like yours," I told her, "is to nip it in the bud. Lou Gregory over in Eureka didn't drive for a month after he had his accident, and now he's mortally afraid to get into a car. Even if you don't drive, I don't want that to happen to you."

Though I had said nothing about it, the wound at the back of my head was giving me some concern. A pulse was noticeable in it and the surrounding area was hot and feverish. Moreover for some time my eyes had been affected. There was a strangeness about the look of everything now. Somehow I got the impression I was seeing through a cube of mirrors.

We reached the crossing, and it was a site of commonplace reality in the daylight. I stopped the car and went into a detailed explanation of how the crash had occurred: how this was a secondary road and therefore no automatic signal was necessary; how the long curve of trackage was treelined and partially hidden from sight; how no trains normally were expected at that hour; how this had been a "fast special" thundering past the crossing almost before I was aware of it. My words seemed to quiet her and I felt with satisfaction that the trip had been well worth-while.

I swung into the Victoria cut-off and headed back for Carver House, cruising along slowly so that no touch of nervousness would return to my sister. On either side the wind rippled the grain fields like waves of water and overhead ragged clouds raced across the sky, at intervals casting great shadows like a giant camera shutter. The black-top road, marked at intervals by dripping red cedars, seemed unfamiliar, and gradually I sensed something was wrong. This wasn't Victoria cut-off! In some way I must have taken the wrong turn; and yet I knew these roads like the palm of my hand. In exasperation I stopped the car abreast of a small boy who was trudging down the shoulder and called out to him:

"Does this road go to . . .?"

The boy advanced to the door of the car and peered in at me. Before I could

finish my query his mouth went slack, his eyes widened and a look of terror entered his eyes. For perhaps a minute he stood there staring, his knuckles white as he gripped the car door. A step at a time he backed away toward the shoulder, then with a little cry he turned and ran. I watched him until he disappeared in a bend of the road, then with a sigh I started the car again.

"Stupid kid! What do you suppose ailed him?"

The road Y'd into two lanes and with some hesitation I swung into the left fork. Presently I was on familiar ground again. But I had gone twenty miles out of the way.

The rain had stopped by the time we reached Carver House. As we passed Oak Ridge Cemetery I thought I saw three men standing, talking, amid the tombstones. The Chaska men or perhaps the men from the industrial plant in Minneapolis come to make a last survey before converting it into a factory site. Anger rose within me. How could they justify selling the grounds when they were still being used for burial? The flower-strewn mounds of the three new graves were visible through the trees. Something about them aroused in me a feeling of possession as if I were the owner of the property and not a mere close-by resident.

That night I again read to my sister, this time excerpts from Lodge's *Raymond*, but the book seemed dull and it was evident that she was little interested. In the study the titles of no other book attracted me. Around ten o'clock I glanced out the window and I saw a light, apparently an electric lantern, bobbing in and out among the trees of the cemetery. Curious, I watched it. Several times it winked out, only to reappear with an uncertain source like St. Elmo's fire. Yet I never doubted but that it was a lantern, diffused by the wetness. On impulse I put on my hat and coat and headed down the lane. But the light had disappeared when I pushed open the lockless gate and there was only the glow of the night sky. Nevertheless I continued to move through the long grass between the neglected markers. There was no sign of anyone, however, and I stopped before one of the graves—so new that one of the diggers' loam-encrusted spades lay beside it. As I stood there, the cloying sweetness of the dying flowers heaped on the mound rose upward and entered my nostrils like perfumed smoke. Simultaneously the dizziness, which had been affecting me at intervals since the accident, suddenly came again, leaving me to sway off balance. Blackness entered my vision and I felt myself falling . . .

Over breakfast next morning I welcomed the three men and told them Carver House was at their disposal. For the life of me I couldn't remember

recovering from my fainting spell and inviting them to spend the night at my home. But they were here; that was all that was important. The three were neatly dressed in dark suits, white shirts and conservative ties.

"Have another cup of tea, gentlemen," I said. My sister sat at one end of the table, I at the other." From the music room there drifted a record-player orchestration of *The Overture To Semiramide*, one of my favorite selections. "You're welcome to stay here as long as you like. When you're through, I'll take you out and show you the grounds."

To get necessary supplies I drove that afternoon the ten miles to Chaska. I had no qualms about leaving my sister alone with the three strangers; she was capable of taking care of herself, and besides the men appeared to be perfect gentlemen. However I was none too sure they were representatives of the Minneapolis factory. Something about them discounted that. It may have been their almost studied correctness. Today there's a dash, a certain casualness about the business man on location that these men somehow lacked.

In Chaska I purchased groceries, pipe tobacco, some aluminum-bound weather stripping, and in the drug store I asked for a bottle of formaldehyde.

"Sorry, we don't stock it," the druggist said. "What're you going to use it for?"

"I'm experimenting with a new kind of plastic."

"Well, I can order you some. Have it here in a couple of days."

"Do that," I said. "I'll drop by Thursday and pick it up."

Arriving back home I saw that the three men were in their room and apparently had given no thought to leaving. In a way this both irritated and pleased me. Irritated, because the fact remained that they still were strangers and thus were imposing on their welcome; pleased, because they provided an interlude in the loneliness that had been mine during my later years at Carver House. Of course my sister had shared that loneliness, but she was a reserved person, able to keep her emotions inside. Sometimes days would pass on end without our speaking a word to each other.

I got a hammer and some brads and proceeded to weather strip the doors of the rooms on the second floor. It was none too soon. We were getting into autumn and cold weather would be upon us any day now.

Just before dusk the sheriff's car drove up the road but did not turn in my lane. Instead he stopped before the cemetery gate and he and two men got out and stood there talking. One of the men turned and pointed toward Carver House. They they moved into the graveyard. As I watched them through the bay window I recognized the two as Barson's deputies.

"There's been more activity in that cemetery in the past week than there has been in the last ten years," I said to myself. "I wonder what's up."

I turned from the window. If the sound at the back of my head didn't improve I would be forced to see a physician whether I wanted to or not. Spells of dizziness were with me now almost constantly, becoming progressively more severe as the night hours approached. The simplest everyday scene from time to time took on a quality of strangeness as if viewed through a series of lenses that were out of alignment.

But my faulty vision did not prevent me from reading aloud to my sister. For almost twenty years I have followed this nightly custom. Tonight I selected *The Dark Elements Of Survival*, a book that was macabre in subject, dealing with eighteenth century sorcery in some of its ugliest forms. I found it absorbing. My sister, however, made no comment and it was not difficult to see that it was not her cup of tea.

About ten o'clock Sheriff Barson knocked on the door. He made no mention of his visit to the cemetery earlier in the evening but entered my study carelessly, smoking a strong odorous cigar.

"How's your sister?" he asked, gazing at me through wreaths of smoke.

"She's much better, thank you," I said. "But she's still suffering a little from shock."

"You really should call a doctor. Shock can be dangerous."

"My experience with doctors has been that you're better off without them," I said slowly. "Not that I'm a fanatic, you understand. But I know my sister's nervous temperament and her aversion to medical men. She'll be all right in a day or so."

Barson began to walk idly about the room, stopping at intervals to scrutinize the water colors and etchings on the walls. These pictures represented some of my youthful ambitions of twenty years ago when I was sure I was going to be an artist. The remorseless enemy of all ambition—time—had stolen so much of my energy. Before one of the etchings Barson halted.

"Some of these are good," he said. "I may be only a country sheriff but my daughter has been studying art and . . . well, some of it is bound to wash off. This is a newer one, isn't it?"

That etching was now one of my favorites. It showed the wrought-iron gate of Oak Ridge Cemetery as viewed across the road from the grounds of Carver House. I prided myself that I had caught the atmosphere of the scene with the high grass turned to weeds and the neglected monuments in the background.

"Yes," I said. "The others are years old, but that one I did only a day or so ago."

Barson passed on to another picture and then headed for the door.

"Tell me," he said, "Have you seen two or three men about the cemetery lately?"

"Yes," I said, "I have. Probably the men from the Minneapolis factory."

He looked at me curiously. "Factory? What factory?"

"Why the one they want to build on the cemetery property. You must have heard all the talk and argument . . ."

He licked the side of his cigar, the wrapper of which was beginning to loosen. "I've been out of town for three weeks. Why would anyone want to build a factory way out here?"

"To be close to railroad trackage and escape high taxes," I said. Barson was a shrewd one all right. Pretending ignorance of the entire controversy was no doubt his method of gaining my vote in the forthcoming election. About to leave, he suddenly stepped past me and returned to the etching of the cemetery gate.

"How long did it take you to do this?" he said.

"Not long. The better part of a day, I suppose. Why?"

He shrugged and this time prepared to leave. "You should install air conditioning," he said thoughtfully. "These old houses always smell moldy in wet weather."

I watched him as he walked across the gravel driveway and climbed into his station wagon. A moment later, gunning the motor needlessly, he drove off.

I slept restlessly that night. About two in the morning I got up, put on slippers and a robe and moved across to the window. The storm clouds had left. Full moonlight spread a dusky radiance over the countryside. The rolling hills stretched beyond the Carver House grounds, diffused into an uncertain horizon. The old stone fountain and, farther on, the image of the Civil War soldier were a study in black and grey. All was silent save for the occasional far-off whistle of a night train. Trains did not often go by Carver House; trackage there was a spur line, connecting with Victoria, the main line running two or three miles to the north. As usual I turned my gaze from my own property to the cemetery across the road. But a moment later, looking directly down again, an alertness seized me.

The door to the house opened and four shadowy figures emerged. Three of them gave me little concern; if the three strangers were inclined to go on another nocturnal stroll it was little business of mine. But what was my sister

doing in that strange company? Watching, I saw her link arms with two of the three men and then they moved out into the moonlit grounds with the lightness of ballet dancers. To the eastern end of the property they walked, their faces masked in shadow, their arms swinging in rhythm. Reaching the garden wall, they turned like automatons and retraced their steps to the western wall. And this was the horror of it—their movements were without motivation like the aimlessness of four congenital idiots. Back and forth they paced; suddenly they swung and moved the length of the lane, across the road to the cemetery gate. There they paused motionless.

At that moment it struck me what an effective picture the scene would make. Even though I was greatly disturbed by the unexplained presence of my sister, I turned from the window and, fumbling in the table drawer, got out my 35 mm Orlando camera and telescopic lens and its table-top tripod. It was loaded with a fairly fast film. Working with haste, I set up the camera and focused it while the four figures remained where they were like models waiting for me. Then I took picture after picture until they disappeared from sight, moving behind a copse of trees in the cemetery. They did not reappear, and quitting my watchpost, I went downstairs with some concern and let myself out into the grounds.

But there was no sign of my sister or the men; in a highly disturbed state I returned to the house again. There, opening her bedroom door, I saw to my relief that she was sleeping peacefully; in the guest room, also asleep, were the three strangers. Apparently all had returned unobserved while I was still in the grounds.

Next day, having completed the "Survival" book, I was prompted to ransack my library in search of similar volumes. Many of the books had been handed down from one owner of Carver House to another. There were several treatises on stone carving by my predecessor. There were a number of books on witchcraft which I couldn't see how I had overlooked and a number of works which had been banned and thus were very rare. These included an expurgated edition of Richard Verstegan's *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*. By far the two that interested me the most, however, were a chemical handbook on preservatives, which would be of value to my experiments with plastics and the treatise on transposition of life and survival.

As I have explained, although retired for some years from day by day employment I have a number of interests that occupy my time, some of them financially profitable. There was my work in plastics, my translations from Latin and German of medical papers and more recently the growing of

mushrooms and vegetable seedlings in the expansive rooms beneath Carver House.

It was to inspect and care for my mushrooms that I went down to the south cellar. Presently I was bent over one of the aluminum frames, carefully breaking clods of dirt. The feeling of the cool earth soothed me and I thought it pleasant and restful there in the half darkness. The south cellar had been used as a storeroom by the former owner of Carver House; pieces of his unfinished carvings littered an area of perhaps ten feet wide along the far wall. The man had been a desultory worker, starting one image, urn or ornament before he had completed another. Mallets and chisels, the tools of his trade, lay entangled in cobwebs on a table by the staircase door.

Suddenly I looked up, startled to see that I wasn't alone. A figure had descended the stairs and now was moving in the deep shadows away from the small cones of daylight that filtered through the ceiling-high-window slits. Like a figure on an Egyptian frieze it edged sideways, head and shoulders pressed against the wall, face turned at right angles from me. For a fleeting second I thought it was my sister.

"Is there something wrong?" I said. "Did you want me?"

But it wasn't my sister. In the gloom I caught a gleam of what I thought was one of the heavy chisels and for an instant it seemed it was about to be thrown as a weapon. Then outside clouds momentarily parted, permitting a ray of sunlight to probe downward. The light showed me how strained my nerves had become the last few days. For there was no one there, merely the crude carving of a winged angel, a cemetery monument, standing on a wooden box and thus life size several feet above the other discarded carvings.

This trick of my vision or of my fancy disturbed me considerably and, a hypochondriac at best, I fell to worrying about my health. To calm myself, to get a grip on my nerves I gave a small dinner party that night—in the music room which was more convenient than the dining room on the main floor. The three guests were in good spirits as they sat about the table. Earlier, acting as a group, they had proposed lengthening their stay at Carver House and had offered me a tidy sum for the privilege. The payment of course I refused. Also they had revealed their identity; as I had suspected, they had nothing to do with the Minneapolis factory, but were three salesmen from the East who had met, become acquainted, and accompanied one of their number to the cemetery where he had visited the grave of a relative.

For the first time I learned their names: Caldwell, Hokanson, and Eilers. Though I had never met them previously, I seemed to recall seeing their

names in print somewhere. They liked Carver House, they said, they liked the rolling farm land, and they liked the grounds about the house and what they called "the artistic statuary" there. Yet my suspicions were not entirely abated. Salesmen from the East they might be, but their speech was pure midwest.

Of the three, Caldwell, the oldest, had an incisive face that was a colorless grey and his lips were continually parted, revealing bad teeth. The other two were comparatively young, in their early forties. They too were not outdoor's men; that is to say they lacked the flush of the wind on their cheeks and the sparkle of health in their eyes. I asked about their residence in the East. But they were chary of the subject or perhaps not interested, and conversation about the table lapsed into silence.

The next day being Thursday I drove to Chaska to pick up the formaldehyde I had ordered, though the chemical was no longer needed, the new plastic upon which I had been working having jelled without it. On the way home I stopped at the furniture store to exchange a few words with Lehman Krupp who doubled as one of the town's two morticians. Krupp was a stoic who would do little more than answer my questions. Yes he knew a family named Caldwell. They lived on a farm over toward Waconia. Hi Caldwell had had a launch on Clear Water Lake. But if I were interested in the boat I wouldn't be able to get it for some time.

"His estate has to go through probate first," Krupp said.

Of the other two names I mentioned, he suggested I see his competitor.

I drove home in a blue mood, dissatisfied with my retirement and envious of the man I had just visited. He had a well-patronized store, he was respected in the town, and he had a nice secondary business which he took care of in a room back of the store. I had wanted to see that backroom but Krupp was too unfriendly for me to broach the subject.

For the past eight hours the pain in my head had been completely absent, but now as I headed home on 41, it suddenly returned, increased in intensity, impairing my vision. I got the impression that I was not driving my station wagon but a team of plumed black horses. It was an odd fancy, partially remembered from my childhood. Also, when I looked at the grain fields on either side of the road they seemed to be staggered, one over another, like broad tilted steps.

A sense of anxiety accompanied my troubled vision and I returned to Carver House, tense and ill-at-ease. No longer was it a sanctuary of rest and quiet; instead it seemed to be a place toward which black events, as yet

unknown, were moving. Seeking companionship, I went upstairs to the room of my sister but she was sleeping and I closed the door again without awakening her. I went into the music room and put on the record-player the Scherzo from *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The music only increased the nervousness within me. I went downstairs to the study and sought to calm myself with a book. But the printed lines staggered before my eyes. Nevertheless I did manage to reread several sections—one could hardly call them chapters—of the Survival book. One passage I went over several times:

And Falon went forth from the land of milk and honey until he came to a vast battlefield where all were dead or dying. And birds of carrion soared and circled overhead and a moldering stench took sweep with the yellow wind and poisoned the air. Their armor rusted with blood, their eyes glazed. Time, the invincible, the relentless, moved among them, already counting the dust of the past.

But Falon was strong and not to be defeated. He went among the fallen of his regiment and drew from the charnel piles those who had been his friends and companions. He drew the three interlocking triangles in the earth and within each triangle placed the number seven and gathered about the whole circle. Then he intoned *Invicta! . . . Invicta!* and other magic syllables and behold! his friends and companions breathed again and Falon had won an interlude and for the nonce was content.

I understood this well enough and sought to put the procedure into practice. But the feeling of impending doom became more intense and I could feel my heart accelerate and my hands begin to tremble. What a strange creature man is, I thought, to create terrors and set them upon himself. I got a piece of chalk and removed the spread from the Chippendale table, exposing its dull unpolished surface. Then I turned to the engraved diagrams of the survival book. The diagrams were not complete and I added to them from the text of *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*. But information there was not complete either, and I rushed through the yellowed pages with frantic haste, a great fear that I would not find what I wanted sweeping over me.

Evening came with my task still unfinished. The main floor of the house grew hot and sultry and through the window dark evil-looking clouds became visible, building up in the southwest. At intervals heat lightning flared across the sky.

In the music room the three men from the East still sat about the table. I had given each a very fine imported Rose Trofero cigar. They were discussing various aspects of psychic phenomena, and one of them, Caldwell, appeared to have considerably more than a layman's information on the subject. But he was embarrassed by my presence and spoke so softly his voice was almost

inaudible. I returned to the main floor. And then to my utter disgust Sheriff Barson chose that time to pay another call.

He came in stern faced and apparently disturbed and at once began asking foolish questions about the Oak Ridge cemetery. Again he wanted to know whether I had seen anyone loitering there.

"No, I haven't," I said somewhat testily. "I've other things to attend to."

"How's your sister?" he said then. "Is she able to be up and about?"

"Of course she is. Necroya has completely recovered."

He looked up. "I thought her name was Helen."

"It is," I said. "But I call her Necroya on occasion. It's a nickname."

He sat there, smoking, looking down at the chalked symbols on the table-top. Damned butinsky, I thought. What did he want anyway?

Suddenly he rose to his feet. "You won't have any objection if I take a look." Turning he strode across the room and almost ran up the stairs. I was up in a flash, seeking to stop him. "Wait!" I yelled. "Wait!"

But he outran me. At the top of the stairs I saw him pace down the corridor and enter my sister's room. He was in there perhaps a minute. When he reappeared his face was ashen and his mouth open, hanging slack. He blundered across the corridor and whipped open the door to the music room. Almost immediately he came out again, clutching a handkerchief to his nostrils.

"How could you," he said. "Good God, how could you?"

He went past me down the stairs, and I heard him pick up the phone. "This is Barson, I'm at Carver House," he said moments later. "Send the car . . . no, send two cars. There are four of them here. Yes, that's right, four."

He hung up and turned to me as I entered the study. "You need a doctor, not these," he said closing handcuffs about my wrists. "But by heaven I'm taking no chances!"

THE COCOMACAQUE

"There is no door open to the transgressor save the door to beyond."

Death of a Regiment

B. W. SYKES

They drove into Victoria at three in the afternoon. Right away Billings sensed he had a setup. The Farmers & Merchants Bank occupied a red brick building on the last intersection of the town's main street. Across from it was the lumber yard, empty at this hour, and farther down, the abandoned creamery. The bank had an alarm bell over the front entrance but the connecting cables weren't even concealed.

Down the street were a barber shop, two taverns, a hardware and a lunch counter, and at the far end the General Store—the sign read: "Supermarket." That was all. Billings parked the car and turned to the girl at his side.

"Back in five minutes," he said.

He walked to the bank, climbed the steps and pushed through the glass doors. The place smelled of ink and old paper. A man of fifty sat at a desk behind the half wall, visible through the grillwork. A woman in a blue dress stood at the counter. The only patron, a farmer, went out as Billings came in.

At the far wall the vault door stood open and with his 20-20 vision Billings saw what it was at a glance. It was a Simpson, Model XXV, double-tumbler, 14 or 15 pinion key, semi-time lock. Circa 1950. A trained ear should make opening it not too great a problem. But he still hadn't decided on a day or night operation.

"I'd like to see the manager," he said to the woman at the counter.

She nodded and turned. "Mr. Davis."

The man at the desk got up and came forward.

"My name is Parker," Billings said. "Clement Parker. I just bought a year-around cottage over on Lake Waconia. I'd like to see about getting insurance."

The man nodded and said what Billings expected him to say. "Our Miss

Evans handles all our insurance matters. She just stepped out. Could you come back in half an hour?"

Over the banker's shoulder Billings took another appraising look at the Simpson. He directed a swift glance at the rear door which was sealed with steel bars. The only other modern preventative visible was an electric eye near the center of the enclosed area, low down on the baseboard.

A half hour would be fine, he told the banker, and went out with all the information he needed.

He walked back down the street to the parked car and nodded to the girl waiting for him. She got out and together they crossed the street and entered the larger of the two taverns. Inside were cool semidarkness with a yeasty smell and a half dozen men in work clothes lined up at the bar. Billings and the girl chose a booth midway down the aisle where they could watch the street through the glare of autumn sunlight on the plate-glass windows.

"How's it look?" the girl asked. She was an ash blonde with large, dark arachnid-like eyes.

He smiled. "Like candy from a baby. Are you sure, Spider, you don't want to wait till it's done and let me pick you up later?"

The girl he called Spider shook her head. "No," she said. "I want to be with you."

Billings lit a cigarette and tried to relax. In spite of the fact that things had been going well for him in recent weeks—that last job in Pine City had been a pushover—he was on edge. For one thing, there was something . . . well, sad about this place. Maybe it was just the way the building shadows fell across the sidewalks, with alternate patches of light where a structure had been torn down or none had ever been built. Victoria was an old town.

As he sat there he found himself looking at a man walking down the opposite side of the street—a big man with a thatch of copper-colored hair, streaked with grey. He was smoking a cigar and emitting great puffs of smoke at each step. The glare of sunlight was directly in Billings' eyes, blurring the man's features, but what was odd about him was the club he carried. The thing had a huge head and was fastened to his wrist by a leather thong.

"Who's the cave man?" Billings asked the tavernwaiter who had come to their booth.

"Cave man?" The waiter looked puzzled.

"The guy across the street with the club."

Something like a tremor passed through the tavernman. "Are you sure you saw him?"

Billings glanced back out the window. "He's gone now," he said. "But he carried the biggest shillelagh I've ever seen. Who is he, the local police force?"

"He was." The waiter turned away, an odd glint in his eyes. Presently he came back, polishing a glass. "As it happens," he said, "That's not an ordinary club. It's a *cocomacaque*. And you really didn't see him."

"A coco—what?"

"A kind of war club they used in Haiti before the French invasion. The guy carrying it was old Charlie Yarboro. He used to be village marshall."

"What do you mean, I really didn't see him?"

"Well the way Doc explains it—that's Doc Marple, our local G. P.—you don't really see nothin' but a personality-residue brought into your mind by what you were told to expect."

"That's hogwash," Billings said. "I saw him. And nobody told me anything until I came in here."

"Well, all of us don't agree with Doc," the tavern man admitted. "But it must be something like that, seeing as how Old Charlie's been dead and gone these five years. Malaria did him in; picked it up in the Haiti lowlands where he lived several years. Also got into a scrap with a filling-station bandit and that didn't help any."

"You mean someone robbed the filling-station?" Billings kept his face blank.

"Tried to. Old Charlie surprised 'em and waded in with that *cocomacaque* he allus carried. Old Charlie claimed that club had mystic powers and I really think he believed it. Some queer dottle about the club being made from a growth that shaded a *mamaloï's* grave on the 'black island'."

Billings paid the man, left the booth and led the way outside. Things were looking up. A bank just waiting to be taken, in spite of the fact that a filling-station had been unsuccessfully hit a few years before. And a town with a ghost-legend that spoke eloquently for the courage of its citizens in the event of an emergency.

But there wasn't going to be any emergency—at least not until Billings was far removed from the scene, for he had now definitely decided on a night operation. Heisting a money-factory in the open may be quick and simple but it's just as likely to go wrong.

"I forgot cigarettes," he said to the girl. "Meet you at the car."

Walking across the street, he saw again ahead of him that big man with the copper colored hair and the club but when the man seemed to pause in the

darker shade of an overhead store awning and Billings came up to that spot, he was no longer there.

If it was to be a night operation he would need tools, he told himself, and he knew where to get them. He headed the car down the Chanhassen road toward 169 and Minneapolis. Several times before they reached Chanhassen the '67 Buick faltered—it seemed to be the distributor—and Billings thought he'd better pick up a newer model before he came back. Besides, there was always the chance of this one being recognized.

"I'll leave you at a motel," he said to the girl at his side.

"No," she said again. "I want to be with you."

They came by the Oak Ridge Cemetery and, as he always did when he passed a graveyard, he idly fell to noticing the tombstones that stood close to the road. Billings had an odd interest in names; it seemed to him that men with high-sounding handles were the most successful. Of course, he told himself, the owners of the names on the stones could hardly be called successful. Not any more, they couldn't. He read the markers: Alonzo Palquin, Frank Jessleton, Charles Yarboro . . .

Charles Yarboro! The grave was separated a little from the others, the grass had grown to weeds around it, and the stone was tilted. Billings had but a fleeting glimpse as the car sped by but he saw that he was wrong in his first observation that the plot was uncared for. A red-headed man was down on his hands and knees, working at the grass.

Billings spent six hours in Minneapolis where, among other things, he picked up tools and another car. He headed back for Victoria. The main street was a melancholy lane of light and shadow as he and Spider re-entered the town from the east; only three widely-spaced arc lights gave illumination. He drove to the last intersection, turned into it, made a U-turn and parked on the side opposite from the bank building, about fifty yards from the entrance in the shadow of an elm. He turned off the motor and sat in silence for several minutes, looking out the windshield. Then he turned to the girl. "Get out of the car and stand in the street next to it. If anyone comes tell them we had car trouble and I've gone to look up a garage man. Then tap the horn twice. If you do I won't come back here. I'll meet you at the highway. Don't panic. Just take it easy."

Spider bit her lip nervously. She was taut with fear. "How about the . . . marshall . . . the man with the club?"

He stared. "You mean the guy the fellow in the tavern called Charlie Yarboro?"

"Yes."

"For Pete's sake!" he said. "You heard the man. He's been dead five years."

"But you saw him. And I did, too. At least . . . I think I did."

"Think you did!" His voice was harsh. "When?"

"When we passed the cemetery. He was kneeling by his grave."

For an instant the contagion of the girl's fear sent an icy worm crawling up Billings' spine. Then he laughed unpleasantly.

"Don't go spiritualist on me. Just get out of the car and do as you're told."

He took up his bag of tools, crossed the street and walked slowly past the bank entrance until he reached the end of the building. He stopped there a moment, then turned into a narrow alleyway. The alley was L-shaped and led directly to the rear of the bank. Here two building lights, high up on the wall, shone on the rear door.

From his bag Billings took a small air pistol and inserted two pellets in the magazine. He took quick aim and fired twice. There were two soft implosions and the alleyway was plunged in darkness. He smiled in satisfaction. But then, in that moment before his eyes accustomed to the change of light, he threw himself to the ground and jerked out his Webley revolver. He thought he had seen a man crouching in the shadow of a refuse barrel. A man with a big something in his hand. He shook his head as the shadow resolved itself into a crumpled paper box. Nerves! He mustn't let them get the best of him at this stage. He exchanged the air pistol for an unframed soloid saw blade, strode to the door and fell to work.

It was tougher than he'd thought. First he had to locate the conduits and deactivate the alarm. Then he had to drill admission holes within cutting range of the bars holding the door. But the bars must have been a new alloy with glass insertions which played hob with the saw teeth. The better part of an hour elapsed before Billings stood in the bank interior. Here there was no sound save the hum of the electric clock on the near wall.

Billings advanced to the vault door and took two objects from his bag. One, a headphone, he clamped to his ear; the other, a magnetic sensor, he thrust against the panel just below the combination dial; he began to turn the dial very slowly.

From far off sounded the bull-throated Diesel horn as the night-freight approached the Victoria station. Twice as he worked he glanced over his shoulder. Somehow he had the inner feeling of being secretly watched. The room was lit with melancholy dimness by a night light and as he looked he

fancied he saw a *cocomacaque*, or whatever they called such a club, depending from the ceiling without apparent support.

From Haiti, the tavern man had said. Billings had never been to Haiti and probably wouldn't have believed the voodoo tales told about the island if he had. But he did remember one story he had heard from a grizzled old codger in the Louisiana swamps where Billings had spent his rat-like younger years. The oldster claimed to have fled from Haiti after killing the Indies-famous *mamaloi*, Rosa Nagusta, while she was in the midst of her black ritual. "I was stone drunk," the old man said, "and I shot her just for the hell of it." That was in 1943 and her zombie-spirit had been searching for him ever since. In his shack in the swamp the old man with a macabre pride had showed Billings a newspaper clipping—dateline: Port-au-Prince 1944—But in the spring of '45 the old man had disappeared, utterly and completely.

Billings swore at his random thought and brought his mind back to the task at hand.

"Twelve . . . eighteen . . . stroke at four . . . eleven . . . nine . . . stroke at three . . ." he turned the dial. But he lost the tumblers. He moved the sensor slightly and tried again. Again he failed. A thin bead of perspiration began to ooze out onto his forehead. Eleven . . . nine . . . stroke at . . . stroke at . . .

The freight's klaxon sounded close by now as the train came into the station.

It was no go. Much as he disliked, he would have to "soup" it.

He got the nitro out of the bag and his hands trembled a little as he prepared it. When he had finished he retreated to the far end of the enclosed area and crouched behind a desk. The sound would wake the whole town of course. He wondered how long it would be before Marshall Charlie Yarboro reached the bank.

There he went again. Not Yarboro . . .!

The explosion came. A hollow thumping roar vibrated the windows, shook the floor and the furniture. Through the smoke and dust he saw the vault door yawning partially open.

He ran forward into the narrow chamber and began scooping up bundles of bills, throwing them into his tool bag. He was working against time now and he hoped Spider, hearing the explosion, was back inside the car with the motor running for a fast getaway.

He filled the tool bag, began cramming currency in an empty canvas sack he found on the vault floor. Far away a voice, pitched in authority, shouted something. A distant alarm bell sounded.

He hadn't figured it would be this close. He seized a last bundle of twenties and stuffed it in the bulging sack. Then he swung the sack toward the door, gained the alleyway and sprinted for the sidewalk.

As he emerged from the shadows he saw the girl, Spider, standing motionless in the street.

"In the car!" he yelled. "In the car . . .!"

But it wasn't Spider. It was Charlie Yarboro . . . Old Charlie there by the car . . . silently holding the *cocomacaque* . . . It was Charlie . . . waiting for him . . .

Rage at the sardonic aplomb of the man washed over Billings. He jerked up his Webley and fired twice in quick succession, but the slugs, impossible as it seemed, missed their mark. All in one motion he hurled the two bags in the car's open window and grappled with the red-haired figure, bearing him to earth. The ease of the action surprised him and for an instant he fancied he was fighting a shadow. Then the *cocomacaque* caught him an evil blow on the shoulder. In a fury he wrenched the club free and brought the heavy butt-end down upon the other's head. Again and again he struck until the prostrate form lay motionless beneath him.

Cruising down Blacktop 3 without destination, the Carver County Deputy Sheriff sighted a black sedan traveling toward the highway at excessive speed. The Deputy turned about, gave chase and after a mile flagged the car down. He checked the driver's license, the unlocked trunk and was about to end the matter with a routine ticket when something prompted him to look beneath the out-of-place rear seat. A moment later he was staring at bundles of currency. Billings realized the game was up and gave in without a struggle. He was taken to Chaska, the county seat and lodged in the courthouse jail and the forces of law were swiftly marshalled against him.

"I don't understand it," the Deputy said. "We didn't find the weapon he used but it must have been something big and heavy. My guess is that Billings went momentarily crazy at the sight of all that easy money. Why else would he turn on his lookout girl friend and club her to death?"

THE GENTLEMAN IS AN EPWA

Whatever you might say about Grayson, he was a good colonial official. He was forty, which is a bit old for an Earthman to hold down an incountry post on Venus, but he had been in the Service eighteen years and his record as *contrôleur* was unimpeachable.

In eighteen years he had banged about quite a bit, yet one would never guess it to hear him talk. Personal reminiscences were rare with him; he much preferred a game of chess or simply his pipe and a chair on the veranda, the last an architectural addition he had insisted on before taking over the Residency here at Blue Mold.

It had made the post odd looking, to say the least. There was the white walled dome, fashioned of steel-bound concrete, set down in the midst of that swamp wilderness like a half-submerged baseball. There were latticed antenna towers for the radio that somehow never worked. And clapped on to one side of the dome, incongruous and unsightly, a veranda of Venusian bamboo and nipa thatch.

Grayson was sitting there, enjoying the comparative cool of the evening after an unusually humid day when his ear caught the rhythmic purr of an electric launch somewhere beyond the screening wall of lathea trees. "That will be Parkhurst," he said to himself, rising. "It's about time."

Five weeks he had been alone, and more than anything he wanted company. It was just five weeks to the day that young Oberlin, his assistant, had been taken sick with fever. Grayson had packed him off in the post gig while he was still able to get about.

"Tell Parkhurst to send me another as good as you," he had said not unkindly. "You deserve a better place than this anyway."

Grayson opened the screen door and made his way down the catwalk to the jetty. The last glimmers of daylight were just passing. In the gloom, silhouetted against the lighter glow of open water, he saw the launch turn inshore and head for a landing.

A moment later he caught a line and secured it to the bollards as a tall gangly man leaped onto the jetty.

"Hello, Grayson," the man said. "How's every little thing?"

Grayson shook hands warmly but cast a surprised eye down into the launch. "Everything's fine sir," he said, "but where's my new assistant?"

Parkhurst smiled. "We'll discuss that later. Right now I could do with a drink and a chance to stretch my legs. I would have taken a copter, but you know how those things act up over this infernal bog . . ."

In puzzled silence, Grayson led the way back to the veranda, switched on a lamp and an insect repellent tube and got out glasses and a bottle of Earthside whiskey. Parkhurst lingered over his drink luxuriously. He was a big man, almost bald except for a fringe of reddish hair just above the ears, and there was an air of efficiency about him in spite of his bulk.

"It was a good idea, sending Oberlin back when you did," he said. "The medics at the base found he had incipient mold fever. That can be pretty nasty, but fortunately they caught it before it got a start. I read your report too. You're doing a good job here, Grayson. I don't mind telling you that this post is better managed than any in Venus South."

He went on, discussing the weather, giving the idle gossip of the base which under ordinary circumstances could have held Grayson in rapt attention. Tonight, however, the *controlleur* writhed under the delay. At length he could stand it no longer.

"In my report, sir, I asked for another assistant. I don't mind the swamp, though it can be pretty bad at times, but it's no place for a man alone. The psychos said that when they laid out this place and . . ."

Parkhurst smiled like a man withholding something until the last possible moment.

"Oh, I brought you your assistant all right."

"You did?" said Grayson, looking bewildered. "Then where . . ."

"He's in the launch," chuckled Parkhurst. "Under the hatch."

"Under the hatch . . . !"

"Perhaps I'd better explain," said Parkhurst. "Your assistant—his name is Rafael, by the way—comes directly from the Ensenada Production Works at

Madrid on Earth. He represents the latest electronic development and scientific research of the present day. He . . .”

“Just a minute, sir.” A horribly chilling thought had suddenly struck Grayson. “Are you telling me that you’ve brought a robot?”

Parkhurst got a cheroot out of his pocket and lit it slowly. “Not exactly,” he said. “Wait, I’ll go down to the launch and get him.”

Grayson’s fists clenched as his superior went out the screen door and disappeared into the blackness. Parkhurst was gone only a moment. When he reappeared, a second figure was at his heels. As they entered the ellipse of light, Grayson stared, then felt his misgivings pass.

The newcomer was tall and erect, a man who appeared to be about thirty-five, with strong aquiline features, clad in a suit of whites, plastic insect boots and a mold-protector helmet.

“This is Rafael, your new assistant,” Parkhurst said. “He’s an Epwa.”

Grayson grinned. “Glad to know you,” he said cordially. Then: “Pardon my ignorance, but what the devil’s an Epwa?”

The shock was quick in coming. The hand he stretched out closed over fingers that gave resiliently but were cold as metal to the touch. A voice said flat and tonelessly. “How do you do. Yes, I am an Epwa. The word is derived from the names Ensenada Production Works Assembly, where I was created. I hope our relationship will be a mutually favorable one.”

So they had sent him a mechanical contrivance in place of an assistant! Grayson could feel the indignation rise like a hot flush within him. And after eighteen years! That’s what came of giving the best part of one’s life to this damned colonial service. Probably thought he was getting old, and this was a polite way of telling him he’d better look to his retirement. Grayson remembered with a pang the days of his youth on Earth. He had been something then. He had graduated from Western Hemisphere College but he had pushed his way through school by his own bootstraps. His father had been nothing more than Third Engineer on a space freighter. Grayson gloried in the fact that he had been accepted by the new post atomic aristocracy on the basis of intelligence alone. Out here on Venus South he had managed to preserve his mental superiority by his dealings with the Venusians, who were, according to the Mokart anthropological scale, a decidedly inferior race.

He looked again at Rafael, and he was astonished at the life-like qualities of the new assistant. Save for a frozen immobility of countenance—the eyes did not wink and there was no movement of the features except when he spoke—the impression that he was facing a human was overpowering.

Parkhurst smiled as he witnessed Grayson's astonishment. "You're behind the times, old man. Wonders have been done in electronics during the last decade. Rafael here can do everything a man can do and is a damned sight more efficient. He requires no food or sleep. He will obey commands as far as his powers of visibility are concerned. Moreover, he records all those commands on an internal chart for future reference. He can talk and answer questions, though naturally his abilities in that field are somewhat limited. But he can hold up his end of the conversation just so he isn't required to do so too often. A background of personal memoirs has been recorded into the mechanism of his brain. His outer covering, which as you see has been tinted to resemble flesh, is formed of the new *transluk* plastic which permits his entire inner workings to be visible when an inner light is switched on. He's as good as and probably better than any assistant you could possibly get."

Grayson sank back in his chair with a look of awe. "Are there a lot of these . . . these Epwas . . . back on Earth?"

"No." Parkhurst shook his head slowly. "Not yet at any rate. Public reaction has been somewhat antagonistic to them so far. That's why we're trying them out here in the colonies first."

Two hours later Parkhurst shook hands, re-entered the launch and disappeared into the swamp darkness. As he paced back down the catwalk, Grayson's first emotion was one of embarrassment. How to treat Rafael? Like any other mechanical contrivance with which the post was equipped—the automatic ventilators and air filters, the storm warning gadgets, the radar screen which kept him appraised of the movements and activities of the neighboring Venusian tribes? Or should he treat him with a quasi-human relationship as one would an uneducated native or a child?

Upon reaching the veranda, Grayson said self-consciously, "If you'll follow me, I'll show you to your quarters."

Rafael nodded and rose jerkily from the chair. Passing through the control quarters of the dome, lit now by a soft glow of hidden lights, Grayson noted with some irritation that the assistant was so light on his feet no sound of his steps would be heard. He opened the door of the spare bedroom, and Rafael stepped inside.

"I get up at seven," the Earthman said. "You will go down to the spring and bring back a bucket of fresh water some time before that. The water system here is temporarily out of order, and I haven't got around to repairing it yet."

Rafael said, "I understand. Where is the spring?"

The question was flat and toneless but clear and distinct. Then Grayson remembered: The assistant could obey commands only as far as his visibility or detailed directions went.

"The spring is approximately fifty yards from the dome," he explained. "You go down the catwalk as far as the jetty, then turn right on the path there." He added, "Be careful not to stray off the path. Quicksand, you know."

Rafael said, "I understand. Spring, fifty yards, path, quicksand."

Grayson went across to his room, undressed, and lay down on his bed. He tried to court sleep but lay there wide awake while troubled thoughts milled in his brain. What the devil was wrong with them at the base? It was companionship he needed here at Blue Mold. One man could easily take care of the duties; but one man would go quite mad if left in this swamp alone for any length of time. It wasn't so much the silence or the incredible isolation, though they were bad enough. It was the subtle, insidious alien quality of the marsh that worked slowly into a man's mind and took hold there like a bulbous thing alive. Wherever one went there was mold, blue parasitical mold that came drifting down from the thick sky like balls of indigo cotton. Where they landed, they adhered with leech-like tenacity, developing rootlets, growing, spreading with a loathsome fecundity. The roily water was blue, the cattail trees were blue, the marsh grass, the Venusian bamboo, the very air had a bluish cast to it. And the damnable color was endemic; already Grayson had detected bluish spots at his fingertips, along the under side of his arms.

The Venusian tribes who looked to him as their magistrate alone seemed to thrive in these surroundings. But they were a low caliber lot, semi-nomadic, too shiftless to build decent permanent habitations.

About midnight Grayson finally fell into a restless sleep. He dreamed unpleasant dreams of pulling a launch through the shore ooze of the great swamp—like a boatman on the Volga—while four Epwas, each identical to the others, cracked whips and urged him on. When he finally awoke, it was with the enervating sensation that no time at all had elapsed. He felt better, however, after he had showered and dressed, and when he went into central-quarters an agreeable sight met his gaze. On the table was a flagon of cold water. Rafael stood in the center of the room, motionless, apparently awaiting commands.

Breakfast over, Grayson crossed to his desk at the far side of the room to lay out his work for the day. This was the part of the morning he enjoyed best. Here he could sit amid the pleasant disorderliness of piled papers, pencils, pipes, and his books on Venusian *lepidoptera* and plan briefly his work

for the next seven or eight hours. The fact that he never followed through on these plans troubled him not at all. Grayson wasn't a tidy man; he did things hit or miss fashion, although in the end he usually managed to accomplish what he had set out to do.

Two feet away from his desk, he stopped staring. Gone were the familiar piles of paper. In their place was a naked expanse of desk surface, the dark *wonwon* wood polished to the nines. His pipes were neatly arrayed in the rack on the wall; his books, three of which he had left open to passages he wanted to reread, were closed and stacked, bindings out, on the desk top.

Grayson's face slowly drained of color. Like all untidy men he hated to have his personal possessions disturbed. He swung and called Rafael.

The assistant approached quietly.

"After this," Grayson said, controlling his anger with an effort, "you will touch nothing on this desk at all. Do you understand, nothing at all. As far as you're concerned, this desk is tabu, . . . *verboden*."

The assistant said, "Desk . . . not touch . . . I understand."

It was a full week before Grayson adjusted himself to the presence of his new companion, but never, he told himself, could he quite accept the fact that Rafael was not human. Several times he had ordered the assistant to stand still while he switched on the light that lit up his interior. Then he stood there and marveled at the world of wires, electronic tubes, and resistors, which made up the assistant's inner man.

But as Parkhurst had said, Rafael was efficient. He performed every duty expertly and completely. His memory was prodigious; he needed to be told only once to do a task. It was this very efficiency that began to eat away, like drops of falling water, at Grayson's usual aplomb.

Unconsciously he fell to watching the assistant in his various performances for something to criticize. He found nothing. Moreover, Rafael was at all times a gentleman which Grayson was not. It infuriated the Earthman to receive a quiet spoken genteel reply in answer to one of his own that was barbed with profanity.

"Rafael, get me my meerschaum pipe."

"Meerschaum . . . I do not understand the word, sir."

"You idiot! It's the white one on the desk."

"Desk . . . desk. I am not to touch anything on the desk, sir."

"Damn you, you're to do as I say. Get the pipe."

But Grayson remembered one detail of Rafael's construction very well and he took pains to act accordingly. The assistant's internal chart upon which

were recorded all the commands given him. It would not do to send him about on false missions.

It was the last day of January when Rafael had been brought to the post. Now it was getting on to the middle of February and on the fifteenth certain as clockwork, the rainy-mold season would begin. That meant for exactly thirty days they would be confined to the dome. Weather changes went off with machine precision here in Venus South, and during the *rm* days an Earthman's life wasn't worth a single credit if exposed to the elements in the great swamp.

On the fourteenth he said to Rafael, "You will leave at once for Village Xanon, see the headman and find out why the regular tax payment has not been made. Village Xanon is approximately ten kilometers from here. It lies inland due East, and there is a trail of plastic discs mounted on trees at regular intervals. Be back here by tomorrow noon at the latest."

A slight whirring issued from the assistant's head as he mulled over this information.

After Rafael had gone, Grayson settled in a chair, lit his pipe and felt extremely satisfied. He had given the assistant a metal umbrella to fend off the falling mold spores, but during the *rm* days that was scant protection. And *rm* started tomorrow. Although he would not admit it to himself, Grayson hoped Rafael would not return. Then when Parkhurst came for his regular inspection trip in March, he could say, "Send me down another assistant, will you? And make it an Earthman this time. That last contraption of yours wasn't very . . . durable."

But Rafael did come back. He came back with his new insect boots stained and plastered with mud, with his suit of whites ripped and torn and his face mottled from contact with mold spores. He brought not only the overdue tax payment but also a small bag woven of blue ipso grass.

"What's this, Rafael?"

"A personal gift, sir."

"A gift?"

"From the Venusians, sir. They . . . like me."

It was the evenings that Grayson always disliked. Where the average Earthman finds this a time to relax and review the events of the day, Grayson always saw himself a day older with another period of frustration ticked off in a life that had been one large disappointment. He was tired then too, even though the day's activities had been light, but weariness was a feeling unknown to Rafael.

Grayson began to hate the sight of the assistant, always so fresh, so composed, always so ready to respond to his every command. The fact that Rafael needed no sleep to revitalize his energy led the Earthman to wonder what occupied the assistant's thoughts during the lonely hours of the night. That was absurd of course. An Epwa couldn't think in the abstract sense. Yet as if to refute this, Rafael was always ready to launch into a series of personal reminiscences whenever the silence hung heavy in the dome. Grayson knew those tales and anecdotes were part of a fabricated past skillfully woven into Rafael's brain by his ingenious manufacturer, but the effect of reality was always there.

"Did I ever tell you of the time I was lost on Mars' red desert?"

"Yes, you did, Rafael. Keep your machine-made recollections to yourself."

As the days of his enforced stay in the dome dragged past a kind of tension began to build up in the Earthman. Grayson sought to fight this tension by making himself physically slack. He neglected the first rule of a colonial on any of the backward planets, that of dressing for dinner and shaving every day. Yet although a disregard for these habits helped to alleviate the nervous strain, he was acutely aware that the assistant needed no such indulgences.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the rain and the mold ended. But with a richer luxuriance than before caused by the excessive moisture, the blue vegetation now took on a purplish hue that spread itself voluptuously across the great marsh. Grayson felt the tension within him increase rather than lessen.

To make matters worse, the Indigo birds—*Ornithoptera-azure*—changed their habits and came down from Venus North, nesting in vast numbers about the post. A repulsive scavenger species with razor-sharp beaks and long saurian tails, they had an unpleasant trick of directing their attack against the eyes. Grayson found it necessary to carry a weapon with him whenever he left the dome. The birds stayed two weeks. They gave way to the Lyzata, equally horrible, who were fur-bearing serpents of python size and who, though harmless, crawled over everything like enormous caterpillars.

In the early part of April Grayson realized quite suddenly that native conditions here in his sector of Venus South had gone from bad to worse. Neither Village Xanon nor any of the other *pahongs* had followed up on their regular tax payments. Furthermore, when he occasionally met a Venusian on the jungle trail, the native stared at him impudently and made no move to bow, a recognition which the *controlleur* always insisted upon. Grayson had only contempt for these swamp creatures, and his dealings with them, as

overlord, were touched with cruelty and arrogance. Two years ago he had found it necessary to whip a Venusian *arcolat*, within an inch of his life, all because the scoundrel had failed to wash his filthy hands before preparing food that had been presented to the Earthman.

When Grayson went to Village Xanon to see about the tax, he was met with open resentment. The grizzled old chief replied he could not pay for five days and no amount of threatening could alter his stand.

"Great sir, why do you not send the man-who-cannot-smile to our *pahong*? He is kind and considerate and speaks to us softly."

Grayson stiffened. "The man-who-cannot-smile! You mean Rafael?"

"That is his name. Yes."

The Earthman controlled his rage with difficulty.

"Get this through your head," he replied. "It makes no difference who comes to collect, you'll pay. Understand?"

Then he had done something he regretted because it violated one of the most stringent rules of a Venus colonial. He had struck the chief across the mouth with the flat of his hand. All too well Grayson knew that to a Venusian the body of a chief was considered inviolable.

Returning the back trail to the dome, the *controlleur* told himself it was time indeed to get rid of his Epwa assistant. Not only was Rafael a calculating errorless machine who could offer no normal companionship, he was disturbing the morale of the entire native organization. Let him stay on here with his equality treatment of the Venusians and Blue Mold would shortly become unbearable.

Grayson mulled this over after he had reached the post.

He knew he could get rid of Rafael by no regular channels. Parkhurst was a straight-laced fool to whom rules and regulations were gods to be obeyed at all costs. He would never consent to replace the assistant unless he were given a logical reason. Moreover Rafael's internal chart effectually blocked any move by which the assistant might be made to do harm to himself.

The *controlleur* set about devising plans and putting them into action.

He carefully changed the plastic discs trail markings so that instead of leading to Xanon Village they wound deeper into a remote section of the swamp.

But although he was gone a day longer, Rafael came back from his mission, bringing the overdue tax payment plus more gifts the Venusians had given him.

Grayson next dispatched Rafael via the spare gig in country some eighteen

kilometers to investigate a report that a saurian beast had been seen in that area. Before the assistant left Grayson drilled several holes in the gig below the water line and plugged them with quick melting *cozar*, a kind of beeswax found in the swamp.

But again the assistant returned and placidly made his report. There was no beast but only an odd shaped rock outcropping which the natives had mistaken at a distance. Grayson nodded silently and this time asked no questions.

Instead he went out the screen door, paced into the compound and halted a short distance from the dome, staring up into the thick sky. Moments passed, and he glanced at his watch impatiently.

Abruptly a high pitched scream of air sounded. An instant later the aluminum shell landed, half burying itself in the spongy soil.

Someday the men back at the base who figured the trajectory of this cartridge were going to miscalculate and hit the dome. Grayson picked up the shell, unscrewed its cap and dumped out its contents; mostly magazines and newspapers, a few letters.

The Earthman always went over his mail thoroughly. There were several copies of *Colonial Spaceways*, one of which contained an article, *The Future of the Epwa*, which he read with a good deal of interest. They were also two decks of playing cards sent by a thoughtful friend in Venus City.

One passage in the Epwa article he read several times:

Under average conditions the Epwa is a highly developed mechanism that is practically indestructible. Care should be taken, however, not to subject its mental powers to sustained strain over a long period of time. Failure to heed this warning by the manufacturer may result in a complete breakdown of the device's electronic brain.

The *controlleur* rose and called to Rafael. When the assistant appeared, Grayson took one of the decks of cards and tossed it upon the table.

"I'll show you a game," he said. "a game that will test your powers of concentration. It's called solitaire."

He explained carefully. This wasn't ordinary Canfield solitaire. It was a better game, less ruled by chance.

"In the first part you need a partner," Grayson said. "although it isn't required. This partner goes through the deck, drawing a card at a time, concentrating on its suit and numerical value, but permitting only the backs to be visible to you. Now here is where parapsychology or crypthesia comes into play. Some persons call it Extra Sensory Perception. As the partner concentrates on each card, you attempt to receive his thought wave and "guess" what the card is. In this fashion you divide the deck into four packs of what you

assume to be four complete units. Of course if you rely on chance alone, the odds against you would be pretty heavy. But since mental action probably sets off a radiation and since your electronic brain has been devised to receive such stimuli, you should score fairly high.

"The rest is simple. Drawing one card at a time from any of the four packs, you form a cross of five cards face up on the table. You play upon this cross in reverse rotation, paying no attention to suit. In other words, on a nine you can play any eight, on a queen any knave. When you have played as far as you can, the next card you draw goes in the corner, thus filling out the cross into a square. Let us suppose this card is a five spot. Then into each corner must go one of the other three fives and on these corner cards you build up in regular rotation: six, seven, eight, et cetera, according to suit.

"The object of the game is to form each corner into a complete run of one suit, but the method is far more than a simple matter of luck. It goes back to E. S. P. and your mental division of the pack by thought-concentration. Is all that clear?"

Rafael nodded and Grayson fancied he saw interest light up that plastic face. They began to play and when the *controlleur* had gone through the deck for the initial selection, he left the table, crossed to a chair, lit his pipe, and sat down to watch.

It was worth watching. With his head bent slightly forward and his body erect in the chair, the assistant was the picture of concentration. He formed the cross of five cards. Moving slowly, sluffing to the discard pile only after long thought, he began to build up three corners. But the fourth corner was stubborn and as the pile began to grow, it soon became evident that he was going to lose. At length he swept the cards together impatiently.

"Again!" he said to Grayson.

So again Grayson went through the deck while the assistant mentally sorted and evaluated them. Rafael was playing hurriedly now, almost as if a high stake had been placed on the game.

For an hour Grayson watched as Rafael lost game after game. The *controll-
eur* yawned then and headed for his room. But halfway he checked on impulse and slid into the chair before the radar panel. For several moments he sat there, turning dials and making adjustments. Then he leaned back, a scowl darkening his features.

The screen told a disturbing story. The Venusians were on the move; large parties from three neighboring villages were apparently converging on Village Xanon. And that could mean only one thing: the grievance ceremony, a

council held by men of the tribes to discuss an alleged wrong brought against them by an officer of the government. That's what came of having a mealy mouthed mechanical parrot for an assistant.

Grayson shrugged and went to bed.

When he emerged into central quarters the next morning Rafael was still at the table, playing cards. The Earthman smiled crookedly but said nothing.

He went about his duties at the post and in the afternoon set out into the swamp to inspect his traps. He was bending over one of the snares when a spiked thorn-dart whispered by his head and plunged into a nearby bole of a tree. In a fury Grayson wheeled in time to see a Venusian thrust his head above a fern frond, leer at him defiantly, and then disappear.

That settled it. It was time to put these damned aliens in their place. Grayson swung into the back trail and headed rapidly for the post. Back at the dome he went to his room, took down a heat pistol and flipped the chamber to see if it had a full charge. He dropped it into his pocket and strode into central quarters.

Rafael was seated at the table, playing cards.

Grayson smiled as he observed the partial fruition of his plans. If it were possible for an Epwa to do so, the assistant already looked wan and haggard. There was a dull reddish glow about his eyes and his plastic hands, as he manipulated the cards, were moving nervously and jerkily.

"I'm going to Village Xanon," Grayson said, striding to the door. "You will stay here and take care of the post."

Rafael looked up from the cards.

"Village Xanon is dangerous now, sir," he said. "If I don't hear from you within a reasonable length of time, I'll follow."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Grayson said. "You'll stay here and play cards. That's an order."

Parkhurst's regular inspection visit was three days late, and the colonial official was somewhat concerned as he nudged the electric launch to the landing stage at Blue Mold. Brooding silence hung over the post and no light was visible through the ports of the dome. Parkhurst climbed the veranda steps.

"Hullo!" he called. "Anyone here?"

A darker shadow roused itself then from a wing-back chair as Rafael, the assistant, came forward, switching on a lamp.

"I give you greetings," he said formally. "Grayson has not yet returned."

Parkhurst surveyed Rafael closely. The Epwa, he was glad to see, appeared in good shape. His clothing, although showing signs of wear, was clean and neatly pressed, and his plastic face and hands seemed in perfect condition.

"Well, how've you two been getting on?" Parkhurst queried, lighting a cheroot. "Where is Grayson, by the way?"

"He's at Village Xanon," Rafael replied. "He told me to stay here and play the game."

Parkhurst's eyes lifted. "Game?"

"A game called Solitaire. It is played with these cards."

The colonial official moved across to the table and while he watched, Rafael swept the deck together and began to explain the game as Grayson had explained it to him. Listening, Parkhurst showed impatience at first; then his brow furrowed in a deep frown.

"Why didn't he send you to Village Xanon?" he asked suddenly.

"Grayson preferred to go himself. He went to see about a grievance council the Venusians are holding."

"Grievance co—!" Alarm sounded in Parkhurst's voice. "Great thunder, what's wrong?"

"I don't know exactly. Except that Grayson struck their chief when he became insubordinate."

Parkhurst slumped slowly into a chair. A muscle quivered on his cheek. "When was he due back?" he demanded hoarsely.

"He has been gone five days. Do you wish to play the game with me?"

Five days! And the fool had struck a chief. Parkhurst turned and stared out into the silent blackness that was the great swamp. Five days! A *contrôleur* had implicit orders never under any circumstances to remain away from his post more than forty-eight hours. Suddenly the colonial official's throat went dry and a feeling of nausea entered his stomach. The cheroot slipped from his fingers to the floor.

With a queer inner horror he realized that Grayson was not going to return.

Parkhurst sat there in a stupor, cold sweat breaking out upon his body while Rafael continued to babble about the card game. His words seemed to come from far off. Something about the deck Grayson had given him containing only fifty-one cards, an error which the Epwa had discovered and taken care of soon after the Earthman's departure.

THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

Annihilate the past and you threaten the future. We exist in perception. Or do we?

Defeat at Macomber
"THE MAD MAJOR"

The contract for the demolition of the opera house reached Spade Jackson on a Saturday in November. It had been so long since his initial bid he decided to inspect the building once again, confident he could cut wrecking costs still more and widen his margin of profit.

Business had been good for the Jackson Wrecking Company. The new building boom was on and architectural eyesores were coming down on all sides. For those who complained that environmental landmarks, rich in Americana, were being lost, Jackson had only contempt. Nothing gave him more satisfaction than the sight of his big buckets, swinging from a sixty foot boom, eating through some structure that had outlived its time.

Shortly after noon Jackson entered his work-cruiser, cut into the second level of Trunkway 56, punched the automatic, and headed south for Royalton. It was brilliant autumn. The air was cool and bracing. He reached Royalton, drove into an older section of the city and drew up before a structure of pinkish limestone that quite obviously belonged to an earlier day.

This was the opera house. Jackson surveyed it with a calculating eye. Three days, he estimated, the Masterson and a dozer, and you'd never know a building stood there. The wrecker got out of his cruiser and walked up the steps. He went past the box office, unlocked a door and stepped inside. The smell of dust and dead air met his nostrils. He strode down the center aisle as far as the orchestra pit, scrutinized the proscenium, the muraled ceiling and the sweep of the balcony. On the back of an old envelope he made several notations; on a pocket calculator he punched some five digit numbers. Then—he stiffened.

In response to a queer feeling that he was being watched, his eyes had turned upward and in one of the upper tier boxes he saw a man sitting silently, looking at him!

Jackson swung about and headed for the stairs that led to the box. He pushed aside the drapes which still hung in the doorway. "What're you doing here?" he demanded.

In a vague and quiet way the stranger looked not unlike Mark Twain in his later years with abundant silvery hair, skin the texture of well-cared-for leather and eyes that were sharp and bright.

"Reminiscing," he replied quietly.

Spade relaxed. Antique nuts—that's what he called them—were a dime a dozen every time an old building came down.

"Well you'd better take a look at it while you can," he said. "In three days there won't be a grease spot left."

The old man frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you read the papers?" Jackson lit a cigarette. "The new Federation Causeway is going through here. Can't stand in the way of progress, Grandpa."

Slowly the old man got to his feet. "You mean the theater is going to be torn down?"

The wrecker nodded. "My boys start Monday morning."

It would have meant nothing to Spade Jackson had he been told that the man in the opera house was Dr. Thaddeus Troy, who once had had offices in Bedford Street as Royalton's leading optician. The doctor was more than a fitter of glasses, however. He had many interests, most of them outre, but perhaps the most intense was in the field of parapsychology. For more years than he cared to admit, he had studied all the relevant material that came his way, had exhausted the shelves of the local library and the city's bookstores. Later, fascinated by studies at Grant University, he had conducted experiments of his own. It was there that he found himself in trouble with the law.

Complaints were made that he had wired his rooming house with a copper mesh and then set up a "transmitting set" nearby. Blue and purple fire radiated from the mesh and Dr. Troy was so evasive in his explanation that doubts were expressed as to his sanity. When he continued his experiments with thirty bells that rang without cause, he was packed off to the Royalton Nursing Hospital as a senile incompetent.

Yet there remained a mystery about the retired optician which even the hospital authorities could not explain. Troy seemed able to leave the building whenever he chose. And he always had a quantity of those obnoxious cigars he continued to smoke in defiance of regulations.

On this afternoon he arrived back at the hospital, breathless and disturbed.

He went immediately to the rooms of Henry Cooper and Willian Faversham, and then to the third floor ward where he singled out George Andrews and E. J. McNair. Troy said:

"In the main floor lounge in ten minutes. I've got something to tell you."

Presently the four men appeared. Troy waited until they were seated, then began to pace back and forth before them like a general before his subalterns.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I called you here because of a common interest. Faversham, for almost fifteen years you were manager of the opera house. Cooper, you were doorman during the days of the limousine trade. Andrew, you served as electrician, and McNair, your interest in theatrical productions is well known. Well, I have some disturbing news. I've just learned that the building is going to be torn down."

Having delivered this bombshell, the optician paused. Henry Cooper drew in a long breath.

"Are you sure?"

"I talked with the wrecker. The workmen arrive Monday."

William Faversham banged one of his crutches on the floor. "What's to be done?"

"We could start a petition," suggested George Andrews.

"Or write the newspapers," said E. J. McNair.

"Or call the Governor," offered Henry Cooper.

"Or get the President to use the Blue Phone."

Thaddeus Troy waved aside these proposals. "There isn't time for those things. No, Gentlemen, we must act ourselves." He walked to the window, stared unseeing into the November afternoon.

"You all know," he said, returning, "what my particular cup of tea is. Well, I would call your attention to some recent events. At La Hava, Mexico, a man named Guarez moved a six kilogram weight twelve meters without physical or mechanical means while separated by two closed doors. Then there were studies at Leipzig wherein a stack of wooden boxes was knocked down and reassembled by no other power than the operator's will. Telekinesis, Gentlemen, telekinesis . . ."

William Faversham shook his head. "We can't move a building up or down by willpower."

Troy moved a hand through his white hair. "I could name others . . ."

"And all in the experimental state. We're facing fact, a building three stories tall . . ."

"I suppose you're right," Troy said, concealing the gloom that swept over

him. He fell silent a moment. "We must think of something to stop this environmental tragedy. Tomorrow we'll meet again. Meanwhile, I'll scout around a bit."

The next afternoon, using means known to him alone, Dr. Troy left the hospital and headed for the opera house. Through habit he took a roundabout route, going down Kinard Street instead of cutting across the scant block of vacant lots that separated the hospital from the theater. At Kinard and Grand he paused before an auction sales shop which obligingly operated seven days a week. Here Troy had found many a pleasant hour of diversion. Today, according to the placard in the window, the sale featured a collection of the late Eva Clayborn Celeste.

He remembered the woman well.

More than twenty years ago she had first appeared in the city and quickly won fame for the odd soirees she held. Troy had attended some of those meetings and found them unlike anything he had seen before. Madam Celeste made repeated allusions to an alien world—not a psychic place of shadows—but the world distant in future time from which she claimed to have come. There was no Blue Phone then, of course. She spoke enigmatically of being a messenger with a warning that the *status quo* must be held between the worlds of "now" and "yet to come". She maintained that the universe existed in the eyes of the beholders, that a balance must be held, that if the familiar props of the universe were destroyed the loss would be transmitted with grave results into the future, "The reality of the cosmos is dependent upon perception," she said, quoting Rigel. "Millions of eyes with blind spots and the opaqueness neither translucent nor familiar. Isn't that what happened in the dark ages?"

The salesroom was not crowded. Troy found a chair in the rear and sat there quietly while dusty bric-a-brac and dreary oil paintings were auctioned off. Finally the Celeste collection was brought forward. Only one item held any interest for Troy—a pair of opera glasses.

The moment the glasses were put up for sale he felt a strange compulsion. He felt he must have them; nothing else mattered.

The bidding began. But not until the auctioneer rapped his hammer and said, "Sold to the man with the cane!" did Troy realize the purchase was his.

Outside, he resumed his stroll, wondering what folly had led him to buy something for which he had utterly no use. He followed Kinard Street to the opera house, entered and climbed the dark stairs to the box where Spade Jackson had come upon him the day before. He sat on one of the dusty chairs, leaned back and closed his eyes.

As always, time for him slipped away and stars who had trod that stage appeared in his mind's eye: Jeanne Eagles, Helen Foster, the Barrymores, William Gillette, Eva LeGalliene, Marjorie Rambeau, Victor Jory . . . And productions: *Rain*, *The Shanghai Gesture*, *Katinka*, *The Green Hat*, *Carmen*, Frederick Lonsdale's *Aren't We All* . . . He heard again the orchestra's Overture, the applause after each curtain.

And they were going to tear it down! A thousand ghosts cried sacrilege!

He got out the opera glasses and inspected them in the feeble light of the box. They had a lorgnette handle fashioned of jade and on one side near the focus screw a little translucent marble seemed fastened without support. There was also a tiny dial that fluttered wildly whenever the glasses were moved. Inscribed in gold was the name, *Eva Clayborn Celeste*, and the words:

"To be used for salvation purposes only."

Troy trained them on the empty stage below. If he had been expecting unusual optic quality, he was disappointed. The magnification was not sharp and "the color correction" left much to be desired. His gaze centered on a stack of old scenery at the back of the stage. Across the outermost piece some juvenile vandal had scrawled a crude drawing in red crayon. Though he had seen its counterpart wherever small boys gathered, there was something so out-of-place in its presence that Troy fervently wished it wasn't there.

Even as the thought came and as he continued to look through the opera glasses, the crayon marks grew dim and faded away.

The significance of the act did not register with him. He left the box and made his way down to the stage where the outer canvas of the stacked scenery now showed a completely blank surface. Troy turned, trained the glasses on the chair in the box he had just left and mentally wished it was gone.

The chair vanished!

With the germ of an idea growing far back in a corner of his mind, he looked for another subject, found it in a Chippendale table in the rear of the stage, a relic of some past drawing-room scene. He wished the table gone and focused the glasses on it.

The table faded away!

He had the answer then and it stunned him. For more than forty years he had been a pundit of the science of optics and a student of parapsychology. Now, for the first time, he was witnessing a marriage of the two. In some obscure way Madam Eva Clayborn Celeste had interposed the mystique of her personality into these lenses.

He walked thoughtfully to the door, emerged into the autumn afternoon

and headed across the parking lot. But halfway a huge crane confronted him, waiting for the workmen on the morrow, its boom towering upward, its cab resting on caterpillar tracks. Across the side was the name, JACKSON WRECKING COMPANY.

Troy gazed at the big steel bucket depending from the cable and his brow under the worn Homburg wrinkled in thought. He drew the opera glasses from his pocket, focused them, and concentrated.

As if brushed by a huge eraser, the big bucket grew dim and faded away.

The following morning Spade Jackson kept his cool with an effort while Charlie, his foreman, shouted in the other end of the telephone.

"I said the bucket on the Masterson is missing," Charlie yelled again.

"Missing!" Spade repeated.

"That's what I said. Missing. Gone! Vamoosed!"

"But that's impossible."

"It may be impossible but it sure ain't here. Now what I want to know is what am I supposed to do with a crane without a bucket?"

"I'll be right out," Jackson said.

Half an hour later the wrecker nearly tore the tires off his work cruiser as he slewed to a halt in front of the opera house. There was no sign of activity on the theater building, but in the adjacent parking lot a group of workmen stood morosely before a crane, the cable of which dangled empty in space.

Jackson walked around the machine from one end to the other.

"Damn pesky kids! I'll wring their necks!"

"It wasn't kids," Charlie said. "Not a thing that heavy."

Jackson began giving orders: "Two men to a cruiser and search every street within a radius of ten blocks. Go down alleys too."

Jackson himself carefully combed the neighborhood. Not until four o'clock did he locate the missing bucket. It lay, of all places, directly in front of the drinking fountain in the recreation-park, a good half mile from the opera house. He questioned several passersby but got no satisfactory answers. He drove back to the theater and made arrangements to have the errant object picked up.

When Dr. Troy presented the chief nurse at the hospital with a dram of *Tou Jour Moi*, her favorite perfume, she smiled as she considered his request that he and two other patients be permitted to go up into the hospital tower.

"I guess it'll be all right," she said uncertainly. "But why? The place is nothing but a storeroom for old furniture and things."

"It has a fine view of the city," explained Troy.

Ten minutes later he, William Faversham and George Andrews were ensconced in three broken-backed chairs before the tower's high window.

"These aren't binoculars," Troy said as he handed the opera glasses to the former theater manager, "but in some respects they're better. They have a power all their own. Now I want you to look at the theater and at the same time give your mind free rein; wish for . . . desire . . . concentrate on anything you want."

Having given these instructions, the optician settled back in his chair.

The demolition began. While the restored Masterson devoured the rear wall Jackson ordered traffic barriers placed at either end of the street and ordered Charlie to take down the name-sign.

Charlie mounted the ladder propped against the marquee and oversaw the cutting of the main bracket while two more workmen unbolted the side braces. The sign was all but hanging free when suddenly a brilliant light shone before their eyes.

Below, Jackson voiced an oath. "You crazy fool! Don't you know enough to cut the power!"

"The power is turned off—at the street. The light company cut it yesterday."

"Then what do you think is juicing that sign—batteries?" roared Jackson. "Go find the switch box."

Mumbling to himself, Charlie descended the ladder and disappeared in the theater. The sign went dark. When he came out there was a bewildered look in his eyes. He climbed to the roof of the marquee again, and slowly, an inch at a time, the massive display swung outward. Minutes passed.

"Well, what're you waiting for?" yelled Jackson.

Charlie raised his hands in consternation. "It's free," he cried. "There's not a damned thing holding it."

"Cut that brace, you idiot!"

"It is cut." Charlie gazed upward helplessly as the sign, in apparent violation of the laws of gravity, remained suspended. Suddenly it fell. The sign struck the edge of the marquee and wedged itself at a precarious angle over the street. There was nothing to do but order the Masterson from the rear wall and bring it around to the front.

An atmosphere now seemed to gather about the theater, a sense of impregnability, a feeling that the structure was alive and sworn to defeat any onslaught against it. Every time Jackson entered the feeling enveloped him like a cloud and he had an impulse to leave the place and seek daylight again.

But the trouble was not confined to the Royalton opera house. In the newspapers Jackson read more bad news concerning the wrecking business. In Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Chicago other demolition concerns were experiencing unpredictable delays in their teardown of old buildings. In Omaha workmen walked off a job when the chandeliers began to break loose and crash about them as the electricians removed the connecting cables. In New York, Miami and San Francisco chapters of a Save-The-Past-Society combined with an even more belligerent organization, and armed with fragmentation pistols and ultra sonic dispersers, picketed buildings marked for demolition. The editorial pages bristled with pro and con argumentation. The opera house delays continued. The workmen grew silent and went about their work morosely. Charlie said they were troubled by doors.

"Doors," repeated Jackson. "What doors?"

Charlie kicked a stone with his shoe. "Jake Reilly says every time he goes near the front entrance he hears a door open and close after him. Only there ain't any doors there; they were taken off two days ago. And Trochek keeps hearin' a whistle and car doors slammin'."

At length Jackson made a decision. With overhead mounting hourly he couldn't fritter away any more time. He would use an SAE-19 above-surface blast. So it was against the law within the city confines. What the hell! They couldn't do any more than fine him.

Late that afternoon he returned with a heavy lead-shielded box. He went along the front wall to a place under the Gothic archway, carefully drilled four holes and mounted the box low down near the foundation. He set the dial for a 5 detonation, astylic-force horizontal, and activated the timer. As he worked, he glanced over his shoulder several times and thought he saw a white-haired figure some distance off, watching him through opera glasses. But when he looked again the image was gone and he told himself it was a trick of his eyes.

And then as he ran toward a place of safety from the imminent explosion he did see something that was not fancy. Even as he watched, the supporting bolts on the lead-shielded box spun free and the SAE-19 lifted into space of its own accord and began to float slowly across the theater lot. To his horror Jackson saw that it was heading directly for his work-cruiser a few yards away.

"Oh, no!" the wrecker cried.

On December 5 the *Royalton Chronicle* published the following:

Considerable discussion has followed the construction of the ninety degree turn on the new Federation Causeway and the demolition stoppage of the old opera house. Explanation came this week from the Bureau of Cultural Retention

and Environmental Salvation (CRES) which stated that after the first successful dialogue via time-communication with the future (known as the presidential Blue Phone) it had been deemed essential to call an immediate halt to the mass removal of edifices and artifacts symbolizing the past "for world security reasons."

S. Jackson of the Jackson Wrecking Company, under contract for the opera house demolition, could not be reached for comment.

STRANGERS TO STRABA

They sat in Cap Barlow's house on the lonely planet, Straba. It was early evening and Straba's twin moons were slowly rising from behind the magenta hills. Outside the window lay Cap's golf course, a study in toadstool cubism, while opposite the flag of the eighteenth hole squatted the kid's ship.

The kid had landed there an hour ago. He had introduced himself as Clarence Raine, field man for Tri-Planet Pharmaceutical, and had announced urbanely he had come to make a botanical survey. All of which mildly amused Cap Barlow.

The kid was amused too. From the *Pilot Book* he had learned that Cap was the sole inhabitant of Straba, and he regarded him—and rightly so—as just another hermit nut who preferred the spacial frontiers to the regular walks of civilization.

The old man packed and lit a meerschaum pipe.

"Yes, sir," he said, "efficiency . . . regulation . . . order . . . that's what's spoiling all life these days. Those addle-headed scientists aren't satisfied unless they can dovetail everything."

Raine smiled and in the pause that followed cast his eyes about the room. It was circular and no attempt had been made to conceal its origin: the bridge-house of some discarded space-going tug. Along the continuous wall ran a triple tier of bookshelves, but it seemed that most of the books lay scattered on the table, chairs, and floor.

Above the shelves the wall was decorated with several three-dimensional water colors, pin-up girls in various stages of undress and mounted trophies of the rather hideous game Straba provided.

"About this survey," the kid began.

‘Only last month,’ Cap Barlow continued, unmindful of the interruption, ‘a salesman stopped off here and wanted to sell me a gadget for my golf course. Said it would increase the gravitation over the fairways and prevent the ball from traveling any farther than it does on Earth.’

He spat disgustedly. ‘You’d think any fool would realize it’s an ideal course that can offer a Par three on a thousand yard hole.’

But Raine hadn’t come this far to listen to the dissertations of an old man. He was tired from long hours of sitting at the console of his ship. He stood up wearily.

‘If you’ll show me where I can stow my gear,’ he said, ‘I think I’ll turn in and get some sleep. I’ve got a lot to do tomorrow.’

For a week the kid didn’t bother Cap at all. Each morning he went out with a reference book, a haversack and a canteen, and he didn’t show up again until dark. Cap didn’t mention that Straba had been officially surveyed ten years before or that results of this survey had been practically negative as far as adding to the *Interplanetary Pharmacopoeia* went. If Tri-Planet wanted to train its green personnel by sending them on a wild goose chase, that was all right with Cap.

But the old man had one thing that interested young Raine: his telescope mounted in a domed observatory on the top floor. Every night, Raine spent hours staring through that scope, sighting stars, marking them on the charts. Cap tried to tell him that those charts were as perfect as human intellect could make them. Raine had an answer for that too.

‘Those charts are three years old,’ he said. ‘In three years a whole universe could be created or destroyed. Take a look at this star on Graph 5. I’ve been watching it, and the way it’s acting convinces me there’s another star, probably a Wanderer, approaching it from here.’ He indicated a spot on the chart.

He was efficient and persistent. He watched his star, checked and rechecked his calculations, and in the end, to Cap’s amazement sighted the Wanderer almost exactly where he said it would be.

That discovery only excited him more and after that he spent an even greater amount of time in the observatory. Then late one night he came to the top of the stairs and called for Cap.

Cap went up to the scope, and at first he didn’t see anything. Then he did see it: a darker shadow against the interrupted starlight.

‘It’s a ship,’ the old man said.

Raine nodded. ‘My guess too. But what’s it doing out of regular space lanes?’

"You forget you landed here yourself. Straba does occasionally attract a visitor. Her crew may need water or food."

Raine shook his head. "I hedge-hopped in from asteroid Torela. This fellow seems to be coming from deep space."

They continued to watch that approaching shadow, taking turns at looking through the scope. It seemed to take a long time coming; but finally there was a roar and a rush of air and a black shape hurtled out of the eastern sky. The two men ran outside where Cap began to curse volubly. The ship's anti-gravs were only partially on. It had hit hard, digging up three hundred yards of the sixteenth fairway and completely ruined two greens.

Then the dust cleared and the two men stared. The ship was a derelict, a piece of space flotsam. There was no question about that. It was also a Cyblla-style coach, one of the first Earth-made passenger freighters to utilize a power-pile drive, designed when streamlining was thought to mean following the shape of a cigar. On her bow was a name but meteorite shrapnel had partially obliterated the letters.

"Jingoes," said Raine, "I never saw a ship like this before. She must be old—really old!"

The hatches were badly fused and oxidized, and it was evident that without a blaster it would be impossible to get in. Cap shrugged.

"Let her stay there," he said. "I can make a dog-leg out of the fifteenth, and keep the course fairly playable. And if I get tired of seeing that big hulk out of my dining room window I can always plant some python vines around the nearside of her."

Raine shook his head quickly. "There's no telling what we may find inside. We've got to find an opening."

He went over the ship like a squirrel looking for a nut. Back under her stern quarter, just abaft her implosion plates, he found a small refuse scuttle which seemed movable. He took drills and went to work on it.

Three hours later the two men were inside. There was nothing unusual about the crew quarters or the adjoining storage space. But when they reached the control cabin they stood and gaped.

It was like entering a museum. The bulkheads were covered with queer glass dials, and several panels of manual operating switches. The power pile conduits were shielded with lead—lead mind you—and the lighting was apparently done with some kind of fluorescent tubes bracketed to the ceiling. It brought Cap back to the time he was a kid and his grandfather told him stories and legends of the past.

Just above the pilot's old fashioned cosmoscope was a fancy metal plate with the ship's name stamped on it. *Perseus!*

"Do you know what ship this is?" demanded Cap, excitedly.

"I can read," said Raine.

"But do you know its history and the story behind it?"

Raine shook his head without interest.

Cap Barlow was still staring at the nameplate. "*Perseus!*" he repeated slowly, "It goes back to the First Triad Empire when the planets of Earth, Venus and Mars were grouped into an Oligarchy, when Venus was still a frontier. Life there was pretty much a gamble in those days, and the Oligarchs enforced strict laws of eugenics. They set up Marriage Boards and all young men and women had to undergo physical and mental examinations. Couples were paired off only after scientific scrutiny. In other words it was a cold-blooded system which had no regard for what we call love."

The old man paused. "Did you ever hear of Mason Stewart?" he asked suddenly.

Raine shook his head.

"As an individual he's pretty well forgotten today," Cap said. "I suppose you might call him a promoter. At any rate he figured a way to make himself a few thousand extra credits. He got hold of two condemned passenger freighters and with a flair for classical mythology named them *Perseus* and *Andromeda*."

Raine, listening, lit a cigarette and blew a shaft of smoke ceilingward.

"The *Perseus* was moored in North Venus," continued Cap. "The *Andromeda*, in the South. Stewart managed to spread the word that these two ships would be heading for Alpha Centauri to start a new colony. He also let it be known that the passenger lists would be composed of couples who were in love with each other without scientific screening or examination."

"Well, what happened?" demanded Raine with an air of acute boredom.

Cap bit off a piece of plug tobacco. "The rumor spread, and berths on the two ships sold for fabulous prices. Of course, the Constabulary investigated, but that's where Stewart was clever. The couples were to be split up: all females in one ship, all men in the other. The Constabulary warned them that it would take years to cross such an immense distance—those were the days before the Wellington overdrive, of course.

"But the couples wouldn't listen, and the two ships took off. People of three worlds made a big fuss over them. The theme invaded the teletheater

and the popular tape novels of the day. Newscasters went wild in their extravagant reports.

"And then the truth came out. Stewart got drunk and let slip the fact that the boosters on the two ships were absolutely worthless and capable of operating for only a short time. By then the ships were several hundred thousand miles beyond the System and out of radio range. Rescue ships were sent out but found nothing though they went as far as they dared. Stewart was jailed and executed. That's the story of the *Perseus*."

Raine nodded and ground his cigarette stub against a bulkhead. "Let's get on with the examination," he said.

They continued down the dark corridors, Raine leading the way with a magno search lamp. Some of the cabins were in a perfect state of preservation. Others were mere cubicles of rust and oxidation. Once Cap touched a chair which apparently had been made of wood or some similar product; it dissolved into dust on the instant.

This was the *Perseus*, the ship which had carried the male passengers of that strange and ancient argosy, but as yet they had come upon no skeletons or human remains. What then had happened to them?

Five minutes later they entered the captain's cabin and found the answer. On the metal desk, preserved in litnite, lay the rough log. Cap picked it up, opened it carefully and began to read:

January 21—All hands and passengers in good health, but God help us, booster reading: Zero-Zero. By radio we have learned that our sister ship, the *Andromeda*, is also without auxiliary power and adrift. Such a dual catastrophe would certainly argue for something other than coincidence.

Our charts show an asteroid of sizeable proportions to lie approximately midway between the two ships. Under ordinary circumstances I would order the lifeboats run out at once and attempt to reach this planetoid, hoping that by some miracle it will be capable of supporting life. But the circumstances are far from ordinary.

We sighted them at 4:30 P.M., Earth-time, a few moments after the booster went dead and the ship lost steerageway. Absorbers! They hover out there in space, clearly visible through the ports, waiting for us to open the air-lock. There are two of them, but even as I write, one has turned and with unfailing accuracy has headed in the direction of the *Andromeda*.

Absorbers! What a world of myth and legend surrounds them! Are they organic or inorganic? I do not know. I only know they have been mortally feared by sailors since the first rocket blasted through Earth's orbit. They are

what their name implies: devourers of life, with the peculiar, apparently meaningless power of transforming themselves into a physical facsimile of their victims.

One of them is out there now, swirling lazily like a miasmic cloud of saffron dust. . .

Cap handed the book to Raine who read it and handed it back without comment. And at that moment Cap saw the kid in his true light: a cold-blooded extrovert who was interested in the ship only for what he could get out of her.

Next day, without asking permission, Raine began the task of dismantling the *Perseus*. He knew he had a potential fortune at his fingertips, for every portable object he could transport back to Earth or Venus would bring a high price from curio-hungry antique hunters.

For a week he worked almost unceasingly at the salvage operations. He unscrewed the ship's nameplate and made a little plush box for it. He took down the dials of the cosmoscope, the astrolog and other smaller instruments and made them ready for shipment. He stripped out the entire intercom mechanism, the old fashioned lighting fixtures, to say nothing of the furniture and personal effects which hadn't spoiled by time.

It was on a Sunday evening that matters came to a head. In the early dusk Straba's twin moons were well above the horizon, shining with a pale light. Cap was in the kitchen brewing himself a cup of coffee when through the window he saw Raine emerge from the *Perseus* and carry an armful of equipment across to the little lean-to shed where he stored the salvage. He came out of the shed and something prompted him to look upward. An instant later he ran to the house and took the steps three at a time to the observatory.

He was up there a quarter of an hour before he came down again, a queer look on his face.

"Mr. Barlow," he said, "what's that thing that looks like a gun emplacement on the flat on the other side of the house?"

"That's exactly what it is," Cap told him. "A Dofield atomic defender. I've had that gun here a long time. When I first set up housekeeping on Straba, this part of the System was pretty wild. Pirates weren't unusual."

"What's its range?"

"Well, I don't know exactly. But it has a double trajectory that makes it a pretty potent weapon."

Raine looked at the old man for a long moment. "You probably don't

believe in coincidences," he said. "But come upstairs. I want to show you something."

Cap followed him up to the observatory and looked through the scope. At first he couldn't believe his eyes. If he had been alone he would have said he was dreaming.

But there it was, a miniature satellite caught helplessly in the planet's polar attraction, midway between Straba's twin moons. He was looking at another antiquated space vessel; a ship that almost detail for detail was a replica of the *Perseus*. The truth dawned on him gradually.

It was the Andromeda—the sister ship of the Perseus!

The kid didn't hurry himself, bringing in the *Andromeda*. For two nights he did nothing but watch the sister ship through the scope. Then he carefully removed the preservative covering from the Dofield defender, cleaned and oiled the barrel and made the gun ready for a charge.

"If I can put a shot abaft her midsection," he said, "it might spin her out of polar draw long enough to fall into Straba's linear attraction . . ."

"Why don't you take your ship up and tow her in?" Cap said.

Raine shook his head. "Too dangerous. I'd have to come to a dead stop to fasten my grapples and at that range I'd likely become a satellite myself."

Meantime the *Perseus* lay neglected save for the tour of inspection Cap took through her on Friday morning. Cap hadn't been in the ship since Raine had started his salvage operations, and the old man was curious to see how work had progressed.

He entered through the refuse scuttle and proceeded to the control room. The bulkheads were bare expanses with only a few nests of torn wires and broken conduits to show where the dials and gauges had been ripped from their mounting places. The place looked desecrated and defiled.

Cap left the control room and mounted to the pilot's cuddy. Here, too, Raine's work was in evidence. The old man stood there, looking at the dismantled chart screens and thinking about the ship's strange and tragic past.

Her life boats were gone and the inner door of the airlock was still open. Her passengers and crew must have attempted escape in the end. Had they managed to slip by the Absorber and reached the asteroid, the name or chart number of which the captain had neglected to mention in the log? And were there such things as Absorbers or had the captain under stress of the situation given in to his emotions and flights of fancy?

Cap had heard the usual sailors' stories, of course. How a freighter had come upon one of them off Saturn's rim and sent out a gig to investigate.

How the gig and all men in it had simply dissolved and become a part of the writhing cloud of mist. And how that cloud had then slowly coalesced into the shape of the six men and the gig.

As he stood there, Cap abruptly became aware of a vague pulsation, a rhythmic thudding from far off. He put his ear to the wall. The sound lost some of its vagueness but was still undeterminable as to source.

He went down the port ladder to the 'tween deck. Here the sound faded into nothingness, only to return as he descended the catwalk to the engine room. But in that cavern-like chamber he became conscious of something else.

He had a feeling he was surrounded by life as if he stood within the body of a living intelligence whose material form included the ship itself.

Clearly audible now was that distant thud . . . thud . . . thud . . . like the beating of a great heart.

Saturday Raine announced he was ready to "shoot down" the *Andromeda*. Unfortunately Cap figured he wouldn't be there to see the show. He had had a signal from one of his weather-robots on the dark side of the planet that morning, reporting that a cold front was moving down and the migration of the Artoks was about to begin. The Artoks could be mighty troublesome when they came en masse. If Cap didn't want his golf course eaten to the roots he'd have to stop them before they started. The generators which powered the barrier wires across the Pass would have to be turned on and the relay stations set in order.

It was late before he made his return. Dusk had set in and the Straba's twin moons were riding high when he reached the hill over-looking the house. On the flat below him he could see the moonlight glint on the barrel of the Dofield defender, and he could see Clarence Raine standing by the gun as he made preparations to fire.

For a moment Cap stood there, drinking in the scene; his golf course spread out in the blue light like a big carpet and in the center of it the black cigar-shaped *Perseus*. There was something virile about that antiquated ship, something different from the *Andromeda* he had seen through the scope. It was as if the *Perseus* were all masculine, while the *Andromeda* were its daintier feminine counterpart.

And then Raine touched the trigger. There was an ellipse of yellow flame, a mushroom of white smoke and a dull roar. Cap was flung backward by the shock-wave. The hills fielded the explosion, flung it back, and the thunder went grumbling over the countryside.

In the empty silence that followed, Cap's wrist watch ticked off the passing

minutes. The moonlight returned from behind a passing cloud, to reveal Raine by the Dofield defender, binoculars to his eyes. Time snailed by. The night was passing.

And then the roar came again, this time from above. Cap saw a great cylindrical shadow slanting down from the sky. The *Andromeda* struck far out on the flat beyond the house. It struck with a crash of grinding metal and crumbling girders.

For an instant after that a hush fell over everything. And then from the *Perseus* in the golf course came a sound, low at first, growing louder and louder. To Cap it sounded like a moan of anguish, of hatred and despair that seemed to issue from a hundred throats.

The *Perseus* trembled, began to move.

Cap stared. The ship moved on its belly across the fairway. Like a timeless juggernaut it entered the flat and slid out across the tableland toward the crumpled wreckage of its sister vessel.

Raine twisted about as he heard the thunder of that advancing hulk. Fear and disbelief contorted his face. He uttered a cry, leaped from the mount of the Dofield and began to run wildly across the flat. For an instant Cap thought he was going to reach the first low hillock that led to higher ground and safety. But Cap had reckoned without the terrific drive of that vessel.

Was it the Absorber—that strange creature of outer space—which had transposed its own inexplicable life into the shell of the dismantled *Perseus* and now *was* that ship *alive* with all the ship's hates, joys, and sorrows? Organic into inorganic—a transmutation of a supernormal life into a materialistic structure of metal . . . cosmic metempsychosis too tremendous for the finite mind to grasp.

The *Perseus* came on, bowling across the flat like a monster of metal gone mad, grinding over rock outcrop and gravel, throwing up a thick cloud of dust. It came on with a terrible fixation of purpose, with a relentless compulsion that knew no halting. It met and engulfed the helpless figure of Clarence Raine and a cry of mingled hate and triumph seemed to rise up from its metal body.

The *Perseus* continued along the moonlit plateau, heading straight for the wreckage of the *Andromeda*. Not until it had reached that formless mass did it stop. Then it shuddered to a standstill and ever so gently touched its prow to the prow of the sister ship.

For a long moment Cap stood there motionless. Then, head down, he slowly made his way down the hill toward his house.

EXIT MR. SMITH

First of all, Elsie, I want to thank you for getting me this job. When I met you in Porto Vargas I don't mind telling you now I was down to my last twenty. Oh, my tour was paid for and the boat had made its last stop before returning to New York. But I had been careless buying souvenirs and things and . . . well, a girl can't go around without money in her purse.

I like it here. San Carlo is a beautiful little country, even if it is run by a dictator. And Rodosa is a pretty town, although I would like it better if it were nearer the coast instead of way up here in the mountains. But then the weather wouldn't be so nice, and one can't have everything, I suppose.

Just as you said, I'm living in the hotel—Antenida, they call it—and I really have two jobs in one. I operate the desk switchboard (lucky I told you I had phone experience and fortunate too I brushed up on my Spanish last winter) and I serve as public stenographer occasionally in my spare time.

Right now there aren't many guests here as it's sort of between seasons, but in a month or so President Solera will stop in on his regular hunting vacation and then, I'm told, the place will really be jumping.

We do have one VIP. His name is Captain Juan La Gola and he drove up in a gorgeous sport model Cithedra-Ole that was about a mile long, bumper to bumper. He is a tall man, swarthy, with a beard no amount of shaving can completely remove, and he wears high boots and a belted tunic with the mark of the Confidential Police on the collar. I was standing next to the room clerk when he signed the register and I couldn't help seeing his signature. And would you believe it, the National Identity Number he wrote after his name was 137.

Imagine me being in the same hotel with a one-thirty-seven. The closest

I've ever come to important people is a twelve thousand, a supreme court judge, seventy years old. Of course that was a Norte American NIN, but even so.

Well, this Juan La Gola asked if I'd take a letter for him, and I did, and then he said I should come up and see him in an hour or so when he got settled, for more typing. Meanwhile he was expecting a package and wanted it delivered to his room as soon as it arrived.

Did he say package? It was a wooden crate, five feet square, and so heavy it had to go up in the freight elevator. It had a lot of foreign seals plastered to its sides but I couldn't read any of them.

After an hour I went up to the fifth floor and rang his bell. No one answered but the door was partially open, so I went in. The crate had been opened, the boards stacked in a corner. In the center of the room on a table was a brand new dream machine.

It wasn't like any dreamer I'd ever seen, and I've seen a lot of them. It had three instrument panels instead of one and mounted on the center one was a thing that looked like an enlarged hour glass with black powder running from one chamber to the other. It had a shiny disc, tipped sideways between two olendrons that slowly changed colors, from red to blue to yellow and back to red again. There was a sound chamber too somewhere, and out of it came a *clickety-clack* like a faraway train.

Sprawled on the bed at the far side of the room lay Captain La Gola, fully dressed even to his boots. He was asleep. A single wire trailed across the floor from the dreamer and divided into plugs in his ears.

I made a noise but he went right on sleeping. I stood there uncertainly, then moved across to a chair. I knew it disturbed some persons to be wakened suddenly while under the effects of a dreamer, and I thought I'd wait a few moments and then, if he didn't awake, leave and come back later.

Now fleeting images took form in sepia on the tilted disc, to be followed by a series of post-card-like views of places I had never seen before. But all was in caricature with exaggerated detail and blurred background. After a while it came to me. The scenes must be the visual reproduction of the Captain's dream while he slept. Never before had I seen a dreamer with a sight attachment!

The whirligig changes continued, then held on what seemed to be the interior of a train. At the same time the *clickety clack* from the sound chamber grew louder. A group of officers in the uniform of Solera's DEP Guards swam

into view as they sat about a table in a train coach. Briefly the features of one officer after another appeared in close-up on the disc.

Then the scream of a train whistle sounded. It was repeated again and again. Wheels screeched, steel ground against steel as the brakes were applied. An instant later there was a muffled crash, the sound of breaking glass and agonized cries. The last scene on the disc became immobile.

Across the room Captain La Gola sat up on the bed, blinking his eyes. There was a little smile of satisfaction on his lips as he removed the wire-connected plugs from his ears. Seeing me, he nodded and got to his feet, buttoning his tunic.

"You said something about more letters . . ." I said.

"Yes . . ." He strode across the room, looked out the window. "Yes . . ." Then he began to dictate: "Don Carlos Propoerty Riaz, Casa Republica, Ventriago. Senor: The Government will require a thousand head of prime beef cattle by the first of the month. You will see that shipment is made to Porto Vargas without delay. Failure to meet these demands will result in your wife's and daughter's immediate transportation to the retention camp at Los Tobellos."

"And the signature . . . ?" I said as he finished talking.

He smiled again. "Juan La Gola, 132."

Yes, Elsie, he said one-thirty-two.

Talk has died down now and I guess we all can breathe a little easier. But while it lasted the confusion over the wreck of the Sonora Express had the hotel in an uproar. The death of five of its most important officers, to say nothing of the many lesser fry, was hard for the Government to take. Confidential Police were all over the place, asking questions, checking alibis, which was to be expected, I suppose, since the wreck occurred only 48 kilometers—30 miles—from here.

They even questioned me, which was absurd, for what would I know about a train wreck; unless I told them about what I had seen on the dreamer in Captain La Gola's room. But that was three days *before* the wreck; and besides a dream is only a dream. If Captain La Gola wants to report the matter, I figure he can do it himself.

I had to do an extra stint on the switchboard last night. Consuela, the night girl went home ill. Before she left she said, "If Captain La Gola should make any middle-distance calls, put him through to operator 5 on C circuit."

I didn't know what she meant by middle-distance calls, and C circuit is an unconnected part of the switchboard with no outside lines at all.

But a moment after she had gone I examined the board and I saw that C circuit did have a new plug and a new outlet, and there was sawdust on the floor where installation workmen had left traces of their work. I thought it queer that Mr. Alvarez, the manager, had not informed me of changes in the board, but Mr. Alvarez is always so busy I decided he must have forgotten about it.

Just at midnight Captain La Gola's line lit up and I plugged him in.

"Consuela?"

"No," I said. "This is Jennie. Consuela is sick."

There was a moment of silence. "Look, Jennie, as a representative of the government I found it necessary to have certain additions made to your switchboard. Can I rely on you to say nothing about it to anybody?"

"Of course," I said. I was still disturbed by that letter he had dictated in his room; but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed a routine harmless official threat. Of course I really know nothing about governmental procedures of this kind.

"Good," Captain La Gola said. "Now put me through on the new circuit."

I called Operator 5, as Consuela had told me, and she answered, and then a lot of queer things began to happen.

"Operator 5, this is Antenida 756-28. Have you an open line?"

"Go ahead, please."

I switched in the captain. "Okay, sir."

Immediately a Donald Duck chatter began, which meant the captain had switched in a scrambler at his end. The voice of Operator 5 came on again.

"I am taking your call, Antenida 756-28. Interspace distance, please relay."

An amplifying hum sounded, followed by a burst of static. Then a far-off voice spoke,

"This is Clieves 4. We are relaying."

Another burst of static. "Rentarion-south. We are relaying. To Janison Sphere. We have a polarated call for you from Antenida 756-28."

"This is Janison Sphere. Go ahead."

The Donald Duck began to chatter again, and a scrambler now came in at the other end. I sat there, listening to the meaningless high cycle. But presently it ended and the light above Captain La Gola's plug winked off.

Well, I asked myself, what was that all about? I was still thinking about it when I went off duty.

After that I began to do more and more work for the captain. One day he dictated twelve letters. I didn't like the tone of those letters and I didn't like

him. He was all spit and polish. He wore a plaited holster at his waist and in it was one of those new logmetic revolvers. He knew how to use the weapon too. I was on the veranda one morning when he took up a position at the far end and calmly drew and fired at one of the hanging medallions that ornament the sun blinds. There was no sound; only an almost imperceptible tracer of lavender and the medallion flew into a hundred pieces.

"Progress," he said to me with a little smile. "Even in San Carlo the science of defense has come a long way."

Well, you know me, Elsie. Curiosity may have killed the cat but it's always been a part of my makeup. I got to thinking about Captain La Gola's dreamer and how he'd jumped his NIN number backward *before* the wreck of the Sonora Express and the death of those five officers and I decided I wanted another look. So I waited until the captain had gone into town and then I took the key and let myself into his room. The first thing I looked at was the drawer of his desk and there I hit the jackpot right away. There was a book in that drawer, a military manual, and between its pages was a folded-up typewritten list and that list contained the names of men prominent in San Carlo governmental and military affairs—I had read a lot of them in the newspaper from time to time—and after each name there was a number through 136 and a line had been drawn through the last names. Other names were marked, some with a check, some with a star, some with a question mark.

I put the list back in the book and the book back in the drawer and turned to the dreamer which still stood on the table in the center of the room. The dials on one of the panels looked about the same as those on my little second-hand machine back in Iowa, but the calibrations were not in English or Spanish or in any language I knew. The disc in which I had seen the visual reproduction of Captain La Gola's dream still showed that last frozen scene of the train interior from that dream.

I turned to the stacked pile of boards from the dismantled packing case which still stood along one wall of the room. Stencilled on one of the boards was apparently a return address:

Janison Production Assembly
Janison Sphere—Terberon Galaxy
Teleport Station Number 5

At that moment I heard steps in the outer corridor. I knew if I were caught I'd have plenty of trouble explaining my presence. I eased open the connecting door to the adjoining room, slipped in and waited until I heard the

adjacent hall door open. Then I went out into the corridor and made my way back to the lift. I hadn't been seen but I had seen things that disturbed me.

That night Captain La Gola again asked to be connected to the new circuit and again the call went through with surprising speed and facility. He had his scrambler on but I couldn't see that he needed it, so loud was the static amplification drone. The call was over almost before it began and the only thing I could understand was a voice that came on just before ring-off. It was a cold brittle voice, and it said, "It is decided then. The twelfth, according to your calendar."

Naturally, Elsie, I didn't say anything about those calls, but when Mr. Alvarez, the manager, came into the office, I spoke to him about the switch-board. He seemed nervous and anxious to avoid the subject. He said,

"Yes, I know. Just keep on with your work as before. And if you want to, you can take the morning off tomorrow and go to the fiesta in San Medro. The bus leaves at nine a. m."

Which I thought was pretty nice of him, especially since I've been here only two months. On the bus I thought for a moment I saw Captain La Gola sitting alone just in back of the driver. But it must have been someone else for this man was in mufti and he neither looked around nor spoke to anyone during the entire trip.

San Medro is a delightful town with a lovely old church at one end of the single crooked street and the market place at the other. The fiesta, or rather fair, was charming. I bought a *tacinta* neck scarf and one of those spangled *oncero* hats, and I drank so much chocolate I thought I would get sick.

There's an observatory at San Medro and according to the postcards in the shops it has a scope with a mirror twenty feet in diameter. I thought it would be interesting to see even in daytime when observation was of course impossible. So I walked up the long cedar-lined trail and climbed about twenty flights of steps, but I might as well have stayed at the fair. The front of the observatory and the walk that encircled it bristled with soldiers, all armed to the teeth, and every few yards machine guns had been set up, covering the road below. There was absolutely no admittance. In back of the observatory a kind of shelf had been hacked out of the hillside and a big wooden wall had been erected as if to hide something from the people of the town.

There was a large door in the side of this wall, and it opened while I stood there arguing with the guards. I had only a fleeting glimpse of what was inside but I did see a massive steel framework with criss-cross braces. The area around the block house—I took it for a block house—swarmed with federal

troops. And when I went back to the bus stop more soldiers had set up large camp tables and were questioning all civilians who were made to queue up and file by them.

"Somebody declare war?" I said to one of the uniformed men. He didn't smile and I didn't realize at the time how near the truth I was.

The bus ride back to Rodosa was restful and after my climb to the observatory I was content to sit in the sloping seat and doze, occasionally opening my eyes to watch the rocky scenery slide by. We were five miles out of San Medro when the explosion sounded behind us, a muffled thump as if a great container of water had fallen from a height. An instant later the shock wave hit; a window in the bus shattered, and the road in front seemed to stagger momentarily.

But I really didn't know what had happened for two days. It took that long for the garbled story to straighten itself out and by that time the significance of it had tapered off somewhat. It was still mighty big news. A Coronado interception missile had blown up in its cradle just outside San Medro. More than thirty officers and men had been killed. Rodosa was in an uproar. Concern of the people was not only over the explosion but for the reason behind the presence of the missile. Why had it been brought there to this little town far up in the mountains? Was the exploding of it an act of sabotage? If so, what persons were responsible?

The confusion lasted a week. Gradually things began to return to normalcy. Rumors passed on and the wild talk subsided.

And then like an anti-climax President Solera marched in with his entourage and took over the entire twelfth floor. The switchboard lit up like a Christmas tree as the occupants of the rooms made outside calls or demanded room-service.

To make matters worse, Consuela was taken sick again and I had to do four hours of the night trick. At a quarter to twelve the outside line on the new C circuit suddenly lit. I plugged in.

"Antenida 756-28."

"I have a call for Captain Juan La Gola."

"Just a minute, please."

The captain did not answer; and then I caught sight of him, striding across the lobby. He took the call at one of the house phones and after he had talked for a moment he seemed to become greatly excited. When he hung up he stood there for several minutes, drumming his fingers on the counter.

Then he came up to me. He became confidential in a way I knew he wouldn't dream of had he not been so disturbed.

"Jennie," he said, "how long have you lived in San Carlo?"

"A little more than two months," I replied.

"You come from the United States, yes?"

"From Iowa."

"And how do you like San Carlo? Specifically, how do you like El Presidente Solera?"

"Like him?" I said uncertainly. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"He's a dictator, Jennie. Do you like dictators?"

"Look," I said with some annoyance, "I just run the switchboard. Local politics are a little out of my field."

He nodded and lit a cigarette, expelling the smoke through his nostrils. "You wouldn't tolerate dictators in your country," he said. "Why should we here?"

I said nothing. He went on,

"When the machinery of a government becomes decrepit, it is time for a change. That change can bring wonderful results when it comes from far out and its operators are far more advanced than we, even if they are alien."

"What do you mean, alien?" I said.

He shrugged and smiled cryptically.

"I'm expecting a . . . friend . . . a Mr. Smith. Will you tell the room clerk to see that he gets the finest accommodations possible?"

Next day the Captain dictated two letters and he signed them with the number 87.

If possible the man became more disagreeable. He strutted about the lobby, his boots polished, his tunic buttoned to the throat. He gave orders and he signed the endless flow of papers that were brought to him.

I couldn't help thinking about that three-panel dreamer in La Gola's room. Was it possible, I wondered, for such a machine to superinduce dreams of the future? And were those dreams merely prophetic or—and I know this sounds foolish, Elsie—or did they *cause* those events visualized on the disc actually to happen?

These questions gnawed away at me and finally I decided to have another look at the captain's room but the door had been fitted with a new lock and I couldn't open it. It was perhaps just as well for I had a feeling I was being watched. And next day when I was retrieving a fallen pencil I had occasion to

view the back under side of the switchboard. There was a small box, the size of a cigar box, mounted there. Opening the lid, I saw a small compact tape recorder.

It soon became apparent that President Solera and his party were not here for a hunting vacation. Oh, several of his aides went out with guns and came back with tropicora quail but they were lesser-fry sycophants whose movements meant little. Every few hours some official arrived at the hotel and demanded to see El Presidente. First came the civilian VIP's, next the military men, bristling with gold braid and self-importance; and finally more civilians—scientists, judging from their talk and far-away looks. Everything was hush-hush; little groups stood about the lobby, talking in low tones. The switchboard was alive with calls, but almost every conversation was made meaningless with a scrambler.

They even took over the hotel's patio. Four big telescopes were mounted on tripods there and in one afternoon all the beautiful bougainvillea was trampled on. I went into town on my day off and found the same confusion in Rodosa. No one would answer questions. Ask, and you received the same answer: "Quien sabe, Senorita?"

There were rumors, of course, and these multiplied as peasants began to filter in, uncertain and bewildered. One family told of seeing "a great white shadow" skimming over the trees, hovering over the ground in the vicinity of Balerano, twenty miles north. An old man reported seeing a huge cigar-shaped thing high up from which smaller wingless objects emerged to descend with great rapidity.

About this time Mr. Smith, Captain La Gola's friend, arrived. He came in the hotel alone, without luggage, and there was something odd about the way he walked across the lobby to the desk. He moved with a kind of jerkiness as if his leg muscles were stiff and not used to action. His clothes were ill-fitting, and I got the impression he disliked wearing them, although they were ordinary civilian clothes. His voice was grating and parrot-like.

"My name is Smith," he said to the room clerk. "I believe a reservation has been made for me."

In compliance with Captain La Gola's wishes, he was assigned to the executive suite on the fifth floor.

Well, I'm not exactly a fool and I can put two and two together and make four. During the night trick I sat there before the silent switchboard with the big lobby deserted and quiet as a tomb, and the more I thought about all the things that had happened since I had come to San Carlo and Rodosa, the more

I seemed to see a pattern take form with Captain La Gola at one end and, curiously, Mr. Smith at the other.

I thought of the wreck of the Sonora Express and the destruction of the interception missile and the closing-off of the observatory at San Medro, all the preparations—troops and guns, and scopes in the patio—and the tape recorder on the switchboard and I thought of President Solera and the wild stories told by the peasants who had come down from the north.

At one a.m. I was having my lonely coffee break when the whine of the descending lift broke the silence. The lift door opened and President Solera stepped out. I didn't know him at first. He wore dark glasses and the collar of his coat was turned up hiding the lower part of his face.

He came straight up to the switchboard. "Is there a through bus to Porto Vargas tonight?"

I did a double take. El Presidente on a bus?

"There's one in half an hour," I said, "but it doesn't stop here at the hotel. You have to pick it up in Rodosa."

He stood there in hesitation. Then: "If anyone asks, you haven't seen me, understand." Before I could refuse, he had thrust a bill across the counter and was striding across the lobby to the door.

He had but gone out when the second lift came down and Captain La Gola emerged. He lit a cigarette, strolled to the door and went out onto the veranda. In the mirror above the switchboard, my only unobstructed line of vision, I watched him move idly toward the steps, stop and lean against a post.

Beyond the veranda I could see the gaunt figure of President Solera as he strode across the brilliantly-lit plaissance.

For a full minute Captain La Gola continued to stand there, smoking. Then he moved sideways out of range of my mirror. An instant later a scream rose to my lips. A thin tracer of lavender had darted across the open space, straight toward President Solera. In mid-stride the man halted while a shudder ran through his frame. His head jerked back; his shoulders twisted; then he pitched forward like a string-cut puppet and lay still.

Well, you know well enough how the assassination threw all San Carlo in a state of shock. I suppose there is no need to describe to you the reactions here at the hotel. The hours that followed were hours I'd like to forget, a frenetic mixture of confusion, gloom and chaos. There were some the murder cast into the depths of despair. There were others who were openly elated at the removal of what they called an iron-bound dictatorship.

As for me, I was in a nerve-wracked dilemma, so shaken I could hardly

operate the switchboard. For while I hadn't seen the source of that fatal shot, I was sure it had come from Captain La Gola. Yet what value would be placed on the testimony of a telephone girl whose only means of observation had been by way of a six-inch mirror? Still I had to tell someone.

I told Mr. Alvarez. He said, "The Investigators Federale will be here tomorrow. I advise you to wait and speak to them."

Meanwhile neither Captain La Gola nor his friend were to be seen. Until evening. Then Mr. Smith came to the desk and informed the room clerk he was checking out. But before he left he dictated a letter. My pencil froze as he addressed it to Captain La Gola. I remember every word:

We thank you for your application for our investigation of your primary (Mokart Scale: 246) culture in your secondary (Class: C-X-1) world. While we found many things which would indicate sociological and technological advancement, certain representative primordial characteristics make inclusion into the Galactic Federation inadvisable at this time: specifically the resort to military ordnance when governmental conversion was suspected to be imminent; and the ruthless homicide of an oligarch simply for the minority dislike of his political policies and the acquisition of his political status. We regret this decision but advise you herewith it is final.

That was the letter, Elsie, and when I had typed it, Mr. Smith affixed his signature and said he would like the letter delivered to Captain La Gola personally. So because it seemed important I took it up myself. The Captain's face when he opened the door was drawn and fear seemed to have frozen his features. His clothing was rumpled and his hair in disarray, as if he had just awakened from a heavy sleep. He told me to come in, in case there might be a reply, and I stood there while he read the letter. A feeling of loathing for this man was heavy upon me. I wanted to tell him pointblank I all but knew he was guilty of the assassination. I wanted to tell him he was a murderer and that I would so inform the investigators Federale when they arrived tomorrow, even though I was the only witness. I would tell them that President Solera had manifestly feared for his life and was in the act of fleeing the hotel when the shot struck him down. But I had no opportunity to say any of these things.

As Captain La Gola finished reading the letter his face blanched. He lowered the paper slowly, then brought it up and read it again. "He can't do that!" he cried. "He can't . . ." He turned and ran out the door toward the waiting lift.

And then my gaze was drawn farther in the room to the table on which the

dreamer stood. There was a motionless scene on the dreamer's disc, the final scene apparently from Captain La Gola's recent sleep. I walked over to it.

It was a scene like a three-dimensional photograph. In the foreground was the captain, running toward an indefinite figure that could be only Mr. Smith some hundred yards ahead. At that frozen moment of the visual dream Mr. Smith was in the act of entering a dark cigar-shaped shadow from whose upper midsection a violet flame was just beginning to blossom outward. There was terror in La Gola's face even as he realized he could not make Mr. Smith aware of his approach. Terror as he realized that in another split second he would be engulfed by those flames.

Well, I guess that's all, Elsie. I never saw either of them again. I did see a petrified block in a scorched glade a mile north of Rodosa, just off the Highway Nationale. The peasants of the district pointed out its vaguely human shape and compared it to a scriptural character named Lot.

GENTLEMEN, THE SCAVENGERS

One thing you had to admit about Captain Southby. He was an efficient senior officer, commanding our company of twenty with an iron hand. Also, he was a gentleman and a scholar.

You saw it in his eyes as he entered the double doors of the ship's dining room, strode to the head of the table, and stood surveying us. While the clock pulsed away thirty seconds, he remained there motionless, noting with satisfaction the spotless linen, gleaming silverware, and the impeccable white uniforms of the twenty. Then he nodded.

"Gentlemen, be seated."

Once those words were spoken, laughter and casual talk began abruptly. But not once in the three years I had served on OB-5 had I seen any variation of that evening formality. Oddly enough, Southby never seemed to consider the fact that he officered a gang of scavengers.

Ever since the Conference of Nine, Asteroid OB-5—the letters stood for "obsolescence"—had been relegated as a dumping ground for all types of space vessels which were labeled out-of-date. It was part of a carefully formulated plan to stabilize the shipping lanes and the System's armament situation. In simple words it meant that no new ship could legally be constructed until an obsolete predecessor had taken its place on the asteroid.

There were twenty gangs—or as Southby preferred to call them, companies—on OB-5, and ours had the cream of the pickings. That is to say, we were nearest the arrival-docks. From the docks a ship was towed in-country by

tracto-car. In swift succession, gangs of men swarmed through her, removing furnishings, engines, and all movable items, until finally the disemboweled hulk was broken into sections and taken to the melting mill. All usable material was marked and catalogued and sent to the salvage depot on the far side of the asteroid.

As I said, Company A had the cream of the pickings. It was our job to take the luxury items from liners, paintings, tapestries, visiscreens, and the various control devices from war vessels. Freighters and discarded mail ships went right past us without stopping.

Company A was also the only gang that could boast the upper deckhouse of an old liner for living quarters. Southby had wangled that concession from the government somehow and had fitted out the ship as he would have his own baronial manor. There were rich carpets, draperies, and bric-a-brac, all of which had once graced the lounge of some space vessel.

As usual, talk that night centered around the salvage work of the day. And, as usual, it was the Rebel who started the trouble.

"Did any of you see those pictures I took out of the *Vega* this afternoon?" the Rebel said. "Worst bunch of daubings I've ever seen." There was a malicious gleam in his eyes as he glanced across at Southby.

"I wouldn't call them daubings," the captain said slowly. "Two of them are Tricardis. One is an Olivant. Anyone who appreciates the old masters would be glad to get them."

The Rebel set down his water glass deliberately. "Are you saying I'm too dumb to understand them?" he demanded.

Southby shrugged. "I didn't say that."

"You implied it."

It was fortunate that Faulkner took that moment to reveal his personal find of the day, a new type Setlor compass, and as the instrument passed from hand to hand, some of the tension was relieved.

The Rebel was Clifton Barrow, and he had a brain that was as keen as a razor. But he was self-educated, whereas Southby was a graduate of Martian Tech. It was not that, however, that continually put them at swords' points.

The trouble stemmed from their opposite social outlooks. Southby was a conservative and belonged to the old school. He liked old things, accepted scientific progress as a necessity, but hated change. Barrow, on the other hand, reveled in everything that was modern. He read all the latest philosophical treatises, and he made no effort to conceal his disdain for the feudalistic caste system which Southby seemed to represent.

Dinner over, we retired to the ship's lounge where the captain began another formality, his evening talk.

"Gentlemen, as you know," Southby began, "my latest lecture experiments have to do with molecular waves. Last week I described to you how I beamed radio microwaves into a balloon filled with ammonia gas. The ammonia absorbed those waves and turned them into molecular energy which was transmitted to the balloon skin. The result was that the balloon skin acted as a loudspeaker diaphragm and gave off sound."

He paused to light a cigar. "Today I tried something different. I fired heat pulses into liquid helium. The helium registered a minus two hundred and seventy-three degrees Centigrade and of course didn't vibrate. But the heat came off its surface as sound. In other words, the heat waves had gassified its pent-up molecules in rhythmic bursts."

There were a few idle comments, but it was clear we were all waiting to hear from the Rebel. He didn't disappoint us.

"Old stuff," he said deprecatingly. "The Earth scientists invented talk-beam lamps ages ago. Why, last year Hom Vey, the Martian physicist, produced an infrared detector with an almost unlimited range by using lead sulphate with impurities of sulphur, oxygen, and crystallized carponium."

"I made no claim that it was an original experiment," Southby replied stiffly. "And incidentally, in the future I would prefer that you confine your comments to something other than ridicule."

All of which is by the way and has no part in the mystery that settled over OB-5. The mystery began on the twelfth of November when the "Great White Ship" blasted under her own power into Cradle 3 of the arrival-docks.

Our suspicions began when no release certificate was issued to Southby for this ship. Without such a certificate, of course, no dismantling could begin. For five days the ship lay in the docks, an unheard-of procedure. Then a small cutter without serial markings dropped in and disgorged a company of thirty troopers, all heavily armed but also without identification.

Under guard of the troopers, six tracto-cars towed the Great White Ship inland, and they did it as carefully as if they were balancing eggs in a basket. About two miles from the salvage depot they placed it on a narrow outcropping shelf, inaccessible from three sides. Then came the Headquarters' bulletin:

All workers are hereby advised that the cruiser, *White Star*, will not be dismantled until a future date. All workers will consider an area of five hundred yards surrounding this vessel as out-of-bounds.

Rumors ran wild among the men of Company A. The ship was said to carry a cargo of valuable jewels and bullion and was being held as some kind of secret war indemnity. It was loaded with atomic explosives, designed to destroy this entire asteroid. It housed some monstrous, alien form of life, found spawned in outer space and brought here to be watched, scientifically, in its growth and development.

Even Southby didn't know the truth, or if he did, he was a better actor than I gave him credit for. But Headquarters should have known that this lack of explanation was bound to cause dissension. In this case that dissension centered upon us, for the simple reason, I suppose, that we were the envy of all other harder worked gangs.

The Captain of Company B, our nearest-neighbor, complained to Southby that someone in our group had tampered with hold cargo. Twelve bottles of imported Venusian wine, still listed on the manifest, were missing. Now I had seen Barrow, the Rebel, drinking out of one of those bottles in our lounge only the night before, and so too, I was sure, had Southby. Yet Southby calmly told the Company B officer to go to blazes.

Next day the Company B men raided our camp. Six quartzite windows were broken in our liner-house; Faulkner received a nasty burn in the left leg from a delayed heat gun charge; and our rotating search lamp was shattered beyond repair.

Headquarters promptly cancelled all terminal leaves and issued five salary demerits to each member of the two companies. But Headquarters said nothing more about the Great White Ship.

Meanwhile Barrow showed no appreciation for Southby's taking his defense in this conflict. Instead he continued to criticize the captain's nightly talks, and he made it a point to insert sly innuendoes in the dinner conversation, all of them aimed at arousing the chief officer.

The mystery of the Great White Ship grew deeper. As always, when faced by the unknown, the men became sullen and irritable. After all, why couldn't Headquarters take them into its confidence? Weren't conditions bad enough on this barren asteroid without having a hands-off enigma dropped into their midst?

Among the men of Company A the situation was perhaps worse than elsewhere, for ours was not the body-tiring work of the other gangs, and we had plenty of leisure time. Discussions pro and con concerning the mystery ship passed across the table, and more than once only a quick intervention on

the part of Southby prevented us from coming to blows. It was perhaps an outgrowth of this tension that accounted for the Rebel's unexplainable conduct on the night of the seventeenth.

That night Southby approached the table and surveyed us as usual before uttering his customary "Gentlemen, be seated." He ran his eye over the company, then drew in his breath sharply.

Nineteen of our group stood there at attention. The twentieth, Barrow, was already seated and, apparently oblivious to us all, was calmly eating. Southby's eyes glinted, but his face remained expressionless. He spoke his introduction and sat down. When the meal was over, he went straight to his room, and we didn't see him for the rest of the evening.

"Who does he think he is?" the Rebel demanded. "All that formal rubbish! It's time somebody put a stop to it."

The following night there were only nineteen chairs about the table. The twentieth, Barrow's, had been removed by Southby's orders.

Barrow came whistling into the room, took the situation in at a glance, and calmly and deliberately took advantage of it. He seated himself in the captain's chair.

The explosion resulting from this act would have been far greater, of course, had not several events occurred at this time, events which were destined to change our entire lives.

First, there was the affair of the Company B man who submitted to curiosity and attempted to learn the secret of the Great White Ship. He was caught and, without the slightest suggestion of a trial, executed. The entire asteroid was stunned.

Next day came the Headquarters' bulletin:

Any worker overheard discussing any subject relating to the cruiser, *White Star*, will be subject to immediate arrest.

If there had been excitement before, there was nerve-wracking tension now. The Company A men went about their duties during the day with grim faces. Nights, they sat about in small groups, conversing in low whispers.

Even Southby, to whom Headquarters represented his one god—authority—wore a worried look, and he undoubtedly would have spoken his mind on the matter if he had not finally completed at this time his personal brain-child, a device which he proudly called his "star symphonizer."

This gadget was the result of several years' spare-time labor. Composed of a spectroscope, a screen, and an odd sort of timing arrangement, it would receive light from stars up to the fourth magnitude, pass that light through a

diffraction grating and play the resulting spectrum on a screen. Each color band was keyed to a certain note of sound. Since there were seven primary colors and seven basic notes of the musical scale, Southby had thus constructed a kind of stellar color organ.

Despite his initial remarks of ridicule, Barrow displayed more than ordinary interest when Southby gave his first demonstration of the symphonizer.

"Do you want to say that the music we hear will vary as the lens is focused on different stars?"

"That's exactly what I mean," Southby replied. "In my machine each color wave length has a corresponding wave length of sound. Now you know, of course, that the light emanating from a distant star reveals, through the spectrum, the elements which compose that star. As the composition of the stars vary, so will the spectroscopic band vary, and likewise the sound tones."

Barrow frowned slowly. "But where does your motion, your rhythm, come in?"

"That," replied Southby, "is my secret. I might tell you, however, that the device is so fashioned as to rotate the color bands past a shutter in ratio with the approximate distance the selected star lies from OB-Five."

Southby left his symphonizer in the lounge, saying that anyone who wished could operate it. But the device ran a poor second to the mystery that hung over the asteroid. The whispering and the strained talk continued, and curiously enough, Barrow was the only one who seemed to show any interest in the captain's invention. Hour after hour he stood before its carponium panel, twisting the dials, tuning in one stellar obligatto after another. One night he caught my arm as I entered the lounge.

"Care to try some of your wages with the fortunes of Lady Luck?" he asked.

"No," I said. "You know I hate poker."

He smiled. "This is better than poker. Come over here."

The Rebel's game soon became apparent. He tuned Southby's star symphonizer to a third magnitude star, Melaris—A. Next he brought out a small sympathetic vibrator and placed it on the table.

"Bet you two to one that middle C sharp or its color equivalent doesn't sound more than twice in the next twenty seconds."

By the end of the week Barrow had a lively gambling "concession" operating in the lounge. The game offered a welcome diversion from the brooding mystery that oppressed us all. The fact that he lost more times than he won didn't seem to concern the Rebel at all. He appeared, in fact, to glory in our

uneasy anticipation of what Southby would say when he discovered what was going on.

But Southby had other things on his mind. On November 22, he delivered his bombshell. In simple words it amounted to this:

Southby feared something was amiss at Headquarters. The strange activities of recent weeks, the unprecedented bulletins, and the entire attitude of the "government" had convinced him that the rightful persons were no longer in power.

He pointed out that the Salvage-Governor's term of office had been up a month ago, and as yet nothing had been said about the arrival of a successor. He revealed also that the daily official reports sent to all gang leaders were not being signed in the usual manner and did not carry the customary Council of Nine seal.

"You know, gentlemen," he said, "that I would be the last person to suggest any activity of a mutinous nature. But in view of the facts, I think an investigation is our patriotic duty."

Southby then called for a volunteer to go out to the Great White Ship. For, as he said, "—therein would seem to lie the crux of the mystery."

Before anyone had opportunity to speak, however, Barrow stepped forward and switched on the star symphonizer.

"Choose your sound notes," he said quietly. "The first double tone that sounds after I strike the table wins. Or loses," he added, "depending on your viewpoint."

Barrow was gone two days, and still there was no sign of him. If no one else suspected, I for one knew that he had arranged his name to be chosen for the one to go. Southby paced the floor nervously. And as the hours snailed past, gloom settled over the liner-house.

Then suddenly the door banged open, and there he was, alert and showing little sign of lack of sleep. We clustered around him, filling the air with questions. He smiled grimly and waited until we had quieted.

"Yes," he said, "I got through to the ship. I was nearly discovered trying to enter the after-hatch and had to lie under the gangway for six hours. I—"

"Did you learn anything?" Southby interrupted. "Did you find out what was in the Great White Ship?"

The Rebel nodded and paused for the right effect.

"Yes," he said, "I did. Gentlemen, there's a woman there."

For a long moment none of us spoke. Then Southby uttered a puzzled exclamation. "What woman? Talk up, man!"

Barrow smiled quietly. "The woman is Dorna Duhalla!"

Had a ray gun blasted into our midst, the effect could have been no greater. Dorna Duhalla, the almost legendary mystic, the self-appointed feminine apostle of peace who spent her life touring the spaceways, traveling from one planet to another, preaching the golden rule!

Duhalla, worshipped by the masses for her philanthropic aid to the poor and downtrodden! It was she who had made a dramatic appearance before the Council of Nine four years ago and by her masterful oratory prevented a System-wide conflict which was brewing. Since that time she had had *carte blanche* to all ports and she had gone about her mysterious way.

What was this woman doing on OB-5? Southby thought a long time and at length had the answer.

"It's clear," he said, "that the trouble between Venus and Mars is coming to a head. So far the one thing that has held off open conflict has been the general feeling of security advanced by the knowledge that there was a definite balance of power in space armament.

"Destroy that balance, by forming a fleet of reconstructed ships here on OB-5 and adding them to one planetary ensign, and the powder keg would be ignited. And if"—and here Southby's eyes took on a hard glitter—"the common man citizenry of one planet could be convinced that that courier of peace, Dorna Dulhalla, was the guiding genius behind this move on the part of their adversary—then the war could begin in earnest."

"But what's to be done, sir?" Barrow asked.

Southby chewed his cigar slowly. "Well," he said, "two can play at their game. Mr. Barrow, what ship is scheduled for dismantling tomorrow?"

"The *Venusian Queen*, sir," the Rebel replied.

"How long would it take to put her in working condition?"

Barrow stared; then his smile widened into a grin. "I see what you mean, sir."

On the twenty-fifth, Barrow again went on a scouting expedition to the Great White Ship. He returned with disheartening news.

No force of men, certainly not the twenty of Company A, could hope to take the ship. One man alone might reach the Duhalla woman, but only if aided by Providence.

"And since I'm the only one who knows the lay of the land, it'll be my job," Barrow said.

Southby made no comment. He had sent word to Headquarters that because of the unusually large amount of furnishings left in the *Venusian Queen*,

the initial dismantling work of Company A would take longer. Meanwhile we were working like mad to put the discarded ship into operating condition. Twelve men were assigned the almost superhuman task of repairing her motors, while the rest of us labored with the control wiring, most of which has been torn out when the ship was designated for the scrap pile.

Two Headquarters inspectors came down to investigate the work, and for an hour we held our breath. But Southby invited them to the lounge and kept them there with a line of smooth talk and a bottle of equally smooth Scotch while the rest of us did everything we could to mask our recent activities.

Finally the night came. At eleven o'clock Barrow left. He carried a short-nosed heat pistol, equipped with a flame-darkener, a length of rope, and a tiny but powerful quartzite-cutter.

At eleven-five, ten men under command of Faulkner headed for Cradle 5 of the arrival-docks where the *Venusian Queen* was warped. That left Southby, myself, and seven others. Quickly Southby divided the seven into two groups, set them at patrolling duty outside the liner-house. Then he strolled over to his star symphonizer.

"Lorimer," he said to me, "what would you say is the most important thing on this asteroid?"

"The most import—" I stared at him. "Why, the salvage depot, I suppose, sir."

Southby nodded as he fondled the symphonizer controls. "Exactly. The salvage depot contains all the extra parts, tools and equipment which would be necessary to organize a war fleet. But the salvage depot also contains something else. An improved Courtney atomic pile and the accompanying isotopes. Am I right?"

"Of course," I said. "It's the source of power of the entire asteroid—the dock cradles, the tracto-cars, the lighting—everything."

He nodded again. "And if I remember correctly, the Courtney pile is encased in arelium-darkite, a substance which, even light in weight and thin in texture and possessing great shielding powers, also happens to have a vibration pitch in the ultrasonic scale of ninety thousand cycles."

"What are you getting at?" I demanded impatiently.

"Suppose I utilized this symphonizer to send an ultrasonic wave of ninety thousand cycles into that pile?"

And then it hit me. "Good Lord!" I cried, "you can't—!"

Calmly Southby consulted his watch. "Barrow should be at the Great White Ship by now," he said. "Give him a quarter of an hour to make an

entrance, fifteen minutes more to contact and convince the Duhalla woman, and say another quarter of an hour to get out. If we start now, we should meet him at the halfway point." He turned suddenly, all efficiency.

"Lorimer, get the tracto-car out of the storage shed and help me load the symphonizer in it."

For ten minutes we went careening down the uneven rock roadway, winding around the black escarpments. Only above was there light, the incandescent glory of the cosmos. Abruptly Southby brought the tracto-car to a stop.

"Something's gone wrong," he said. "Barrow should be here."

We sat there, staring into the darkness. Ahead, far to our left, a vague glow marked the power plant of the salvage depot. Suddenly a squad of running figures appeared in the gloom, and a brittle voice said:

"Don't move. You're under arrest."

Ten troopers swarmed down upon us, heat guns leveled. In a matter of seconds they had pinioned our arms, clamped steel bands about our wrists and ankles. The leader surveyed us and smiled sardonically.

"It might interest you to know that we've got another of your men at Headquarters. The fool was crazy enough to try to get into the *White Star*."

They threw us in the rear compartment of the car and posted two guards over us.

"Go to the Company A liner-house," the officer directed the rest of the men. "Place the entire gang under arrest."

Then we were moving down the roadway once again, this time with the car's ato-light boring a hole through the darkness. Looking across at Southby I saw that he, too, was in the depths of despair. The car jounced on monotonously, eating up the miles. It was the captain's fault, I told myself bitterly, that we were in this predicament. With his usual flare for the dramatic, he had to play a lone hand. Why hadn't we taken off in the *Venusian Queen* and headed for Earth, there to report to the Council the conditions we suspected?

In the darkness Southby seemed to read my mind. "It was our only chance," he said bitterly.

A mile from Headquarters the car suddenly skidded to a halt. Ten yards ahead, squarely blocking the roadway, a huge boulder lay in the glare of the ato-light. The officer leaped from the car and clutched at his heat pistol.

But he got only half way. From the blackness beyond the ato-light a faint tracer of flame lanced across the intervening space. The officer collapsed without a sound.

The remaining three troopers vaulted out of the car as one man. Twice again that sliver of flame sped to its mark, leaving two of the men writhing on the ground. The last guard was no coward. He ripped free one of the car's side panels, and holding it before him as a shield, began to run forward toward the source of those ray charges.

And then Barrow came leaping out of the shadows to meet him. They struck like blocks of wood, began hammering each other mercilessly there in the roadway in the ato-beam glare. While Southby looked on helplessly, Barrow warded off a series of savage blows, then feinted with a peculiar weaving backstep. The trooper rushed in for the kill. But Barrow swiveled and drove his right arm forward like a piston. The trooper went down in a heap.

Barrow darted back into the shadows and reappeared a moment later, leading a young woman. Even through her plastic helmet I could see a face of loveliness, tempered by a resolute mouth and strong dominating eyes. It was a face that lured and radiated power, and it was framed by a cascade of blue black hair.

"This is Dorna Duhalla," Barrow said. "They caught us as we were making our escape from the Great White Ship, but we managed to escape."

He saw the clamps on our wrist and ankles then, quickly slipped a reducer on his heat pistol and in rapid succession placed the muzzle against the locks. The shackles fell free.

"I'm afraid the jig's up," he went on grimly. "By now Headquarters will have notified the docks and spread the word over the entire asteroid."

"Not the docks," replied Southby. "Our men had instructions to throw an interference shield between their televisions and Headquarters' transmitters." He turned to the Duhalla woman. "We're going to try and get you off OB-5. There'll be considerable danger. Are you game to try?"

"Of course," she said. "Anything is better than submitting to those war lords." Her voice was low and throaty with just a suggestion of a Venusian drawl.

The Captain nodded. "We'll cross overland through the Divide. They won't expect that, and we may be able to pick up another tracto-car at the Company C diggings."

He drove the car off the roadway, hiding it under a shelf of overhanging rock. A moment later the four of us were striding rapidly along the plateau.

Of that mad cross-over trek I remember little. Through the darkness, over razor-edged rock that cut our shoes to ribbons, we raced against time, spurred on by the tireless Southby. As he paced along, the captain told Barrow of the

failure of his plan to destroy the atomic power plant by means of the symphonizer. Suddenly we reached the Company C camp.

Silent as shadows, we ran the tracto-car out of the lean-to shelter. Then we were speeding toward the arrival-docks.

The docks were in darkness when we reached them. Southby flashed a pencil zet-light three times, the pre-arranged signal, then led the way cautiously toward the massive shadow that was the *Venusian Queen*. Inside the ship, behind darkened ports, everything was in readiness for a take-off. From below decks came the muted throb of the rebuilt engines. Faulkner stood at the manual pilot, awaiting orders to cast off. In the forward-cuddy two men raced to set up a twenty-pound, short-range genithoid gun which had been discovered at the last moment in the lower hold.

Southby made a rapid but careful inspection, then turned to Barrow. "It is now two thirty-five A.M.," he said. "Set your watch. In exactly five minutes blast off."

Barrow looked puzzled. "Where are you going, sir?"

The captain passed a hand wearily over his eyes and smiled. "I'n a little done up," he said. "Guess that hike across the Divide was too much for me."

There was an odd glitter in the Rebel's eyes as he saluted and nodded. Two slow minutes ticked by on my wrist watch. The lights were extinguished, and the cover-panels slid back on the stern ports. From below decks came a singing whine as the engines jockeyed to full power.

The Rebel touched my arm. "Take over, Lorimer," he said. "I'm worried about the Old Man. Going to see if he's all right."

I say now that it was the excitement of the moment that hid the significance of his words. Watching the illuminated hand of my watch, I waited. Hollow and muffled sounded the metallic clang of the after-hatch as it was opened and closed.

"Cast off!"

There was a roar of a thousand thunders and a violent lurch that sucked the breath out of our bodies. For an instant a wave of blind vertigo swept over us as the great ship knifed upward into space.

Then the overhead lights went on again. Faulkner burst into the cuddy.

"Barrow and Southby!" he cried. "They're not aboard, sir!"

I stared. "What do you mean?"

"They knocked out our man posted at the after-hatch and went ashore a minute before we took off!"

An hour later we stood on the *Venusian Queen's* bridge deck and gazed

through the massive observation-shield at the orange-sized globe that was Asteroid OB-5 far below us. "Why did they do it?" I said. "Why, why?"

No one replied. At my side Faulkner spoke through the mike to the control-cuddy. "Drop five thousand, reduce speed to one-quarter forward and circle on a number three parabolic."

The *Venusian Queen* dipped back toward OB-5. Down there two men were racing against time, fighting to cross a darkened expanse of razor-edged rock and reach the star symphonizer, hidden in a concealed tracto-car. The odds were against them, for even if they did reach the symphonizer unopposed, they must still wheel it across a mile of guarded and heavily mined roadway to the salvage depot. There were the impenetration walls to pass, the automatic ramp to navigate—

We were closer in now, and through the infrared filter that Faulkner dragged over the observation-shield, we could see the barren contours of the asteroid. Faulkner squinted through the magnascope.

"Two cruisers making ready to take off, sir," he said. "They'll be after us in a moment."

But still the *Venusian Queen* did not change her course. And then suddenly it came! Below us a titanic orange-colored ball of fire appeared, to outline tumbling rock crags against black escarpments. It was gone in an instant, to be replaced by a mounting grey-black cloud. Then the smoke slowly diffused, and there was only a dull glow like light seen through a blank negative.

"That was a glorious thing to do," Dorna Duhalla said.

Faulkner nodded. "You know," he said, "they were both gentlemen."

ROUND ROBIN

"Go North, young man; go north into the land of the Deceivers. But do not count your steps, for there is no return."

Drugs, Dregs, and Decay
EDWARD ELDRIDGE

For almost thirty years Mark Foster had worked at the craft of being a writer. He had written with a modicum of skill and a fair amount of success, but that success had dwindled during the current year. An historical novel had sold only a few thousand copies. A treatise on biocorbic chemistry had been rejected by his publishers. And a syndicated column which he had penned for as long as he could remember had been halted after a chain of newspaper cancellations.

The idea, Foster felt sure, would change all that.

Of course Round-Robins were an old device and a Round-Robin applied to a science fiction novel had been done before; that is, a book passed from one to another of a series of writers, each writing one or more chapters. But Foster proposed something different. He would utilize six authors who were tops in their fields and who, in addition, were citizens of other worlds with a regional awareness of their planets: Dureya on Allisto, Armstrong on Trobos, Royal on Marie Galante, the James brothers on Renitaron, and Watson Fay on 11QR5.

Of these six, Watson Fay was the only one with whom he had had any previous contact. Ten years ago he had instigated a lawsuit against this writer, charging plagiarism. The man had stolen a portion of one of Foster's books and published it under his by-line. The case had been thrown out for lack of evidence but in the decade that had since passed, Foster's hate for the man had not diminished.

Why then choose him for one of the authors of the Round-Robin? Well for one thing, Fay was a crack writer steeped in the history and geography of his nameless planet. And for another—reprisal. Foster thought he saw in the

development of the projected book a subtle way to get even with this literary thief.

On April 5th he dispatched letters to the five other writers he had chosen and a month later old Updyke, the postman, delivered the replies almost concurrently. Foster's pleasure knew no bounds when he read that all five had accepted his proposal. Filled with enthusiasm, he rolled a sheet of paper in the dictatype and started work. He was halfway through an outline of the plot when his friend and physician, Dr. Evans, made an unexpected call.

"Thought I'd stop by and see how you were getting along," Evans said. "You were looking seedy a few weeks ago."

"I'm all right," Foster said.

"You had all the symptoms of deep-space malady," Evans went on, "even though you hadn't been away from Earth for ten years."

"I told you my dream-machine shorted while I was asleep. The burns were superficial."

Evans nodded. "They were also green in color and that's a mark of the fever. Have you had any hallucinations lately?"

"The only hallucination I've had has been the sight of your bill," Foster said with a laugh.

It was apparent, however, that Foster was not interested in further chit-chat and after a few moments the physician took up his hat to leave. At the door Evans paused.

"The malady strikes suddenly. If you should detect streaks going up your neck, don't delay in calling me."

Foster went back to his work.

He began by describing the small village of Victoria, deliberately selecting a placid buccolic setting to offset the fantasy passages. Skillfully he introduced three characters, then a fourth, narrated the initial event of the story-line, and carried the action to the nearest spaceport. There he described the space ship which was to be the scene of a crime. He was an old hand at all this and he enjoyed his work. When the chapter was completed he read it over and in the accompanying letter he suggested that Dureya make use of his Allistan background.

Martha, Foster's wife, a buxom woman with flaxen hair turning grey, read the letter.

"Humph!" she said. "Why don't you write all the chapters yourself? Are you afraid you can't do a good enough job?"

"No, I'm not afraid of that at all. But those five names on the book will insure a good sale."

When it arrived Foster read Dureya's manuscript several times. It wasn't bad, he told himself; it wasn't bad at all. Only one thing disturbed him and that was an intangible. It seemed he had read it before. Not the text but the style, which somehow was familiar.

Before continuing with the book, however—he had decided to write the sixth chapter himself—he set out to clear his brain by a walk through the city streets. Strolling aimlessly down dark byways, past shabby tenements, he heard the distant cry of a newsboy: "Earth spaceliner feared shot down! Washington concerned!" Stupid politicians, Foster thought. They won't rest until they have us entangled in another planetary mess.

He came to an open corner, looked up into the spangled heavens and remembered his youth when he had not been chained to one world by middle-aged responsibilities. For Martha was no cosmopolite. She was content to live in one place, a life of sedentary respectability.

Something became visible in the darkness above him. A man's face floated there, slowly turning. Was he quite mad or was it the face of Watson Fay? It disappeared and with a little shock Foster realized that it had been a trick of his vision.

In the next week Updyke brought more envelopes and each time, as before, asked payment for postage-due. "Don't those chaps ever buy stamps?" Foster grumbled. The postman looked at him queerly but said nothing.

The seventh and eighth chapters were the work of the James brothers and they were excellent. Renitaron, under their combined pens, stood forth as a truly alien world with cat-tail trees twenty meters tall and scarlet grass that rippled in the wind like a sea of blood.

But pleased though he was with the growing script, Foster found himself disturbed by the old-time familiarity he read in it. This was spotted by Martha when she read the story as far as it had progressed.

"It sounds old-fashioned," she said, "as if it had been written a generation ago. I thought you said the Jameses were young men."

"Well, they're not old," Foster said.

"I wish you had never started this book," Martha said.

"Why?"

"I don't know why. I think you would have done better by yourself. People aren't going to buy it because of names on the jacket. And who are these writers? I never heard of them."

"They're tops in their fields," said Foster. And he added stubbornly, "The book will sell."

On a hot summer day in the latter part of July when he least expected it Foster had another seizure with his eyes. Concerned, he called on Doctor Evans.

"I seem to see a man's face floating above me," he told the physician. "At first I thought it might be a refraction of the street lights. But yesterday it came again in daylight while I was in my apartment."

"A man's face . . ." the Doctor said. "Was it the same face on both occasions?"

Foster nodded.

"The face of someone you know?"

"I thought so at first. Now I'm not sure."

Evans was noncommittal in his diagnosis. Foster hesitated at the door.

"Doctor," he said, "What's Lethar?"

"Lethar? A mixture of Lebantropol and Tharnopsis. Why?"

"I heard it was good for a . . . case like mine."

Evans smiled. "You're thinking of Lethob. Lebantropol and other things but no Tharnopsis. You can try it if you wish." He reached for his prescription pad. "Lethar you know is the principal drug in DRSH."

"What's that?"

"Delayed Remote Subliminal Hypnosis. I'm not a neurologist but I understand that if a small amount of Lethar can be introduced into the bloodstream a subliminal command will become a part of the patient's mentality and induce complete obedience. It doesn't always work."

Not at all satisfied, Foster returned to his apartment.

He cleared his desk and launched full tilt into his work, but after a few pages the script became a miserable blockade through which he labored with the greatest difficulty. Every sentence, every word of dialogue seemed stilted. At length in desperation he packaged the manuscript and sent it to Sanford Royal on Marie Galante, with the request that he rewrite the tenth chapter completely.

Two weeks went by, three. At the beginning of the fourth week a fat envelope finally arrived. Foster opened it hurriedly. Royal's work was superb. Again however that nebulous thing called style set Foster to wondering. The chapters were somehow reminiscent of the past.

But now the manuscript took second place in Foster's attention. The time

had come to put into action the underground angle of his basic scheme. The time had come to contact Watson Fay.

With his letter to this sixth and last writer of the Round-Robin he enclosed tear-sheets from a rare old publication, *Revue Metaphysique*, a collector's item he had come upon many years ago. It was an essay on the power of numerals, tracing their history from the shadowy past.

And that, he congratulated himself, was just the addition needed. For Watson Fay, the sublime fool, was an avowed numerologist.

Foster dispatched the letter, replete with a false signature, via YRB mail, which meant it would be subject to a minimum of censorship. That done, he sought to refresh himself again with a night walk through the city streets. Again he heard the cries of a newsboy: "Washington terms shooting down of second spaceliner act of treachery!" And again when he reached that open intersection and looked up into the dark sky he saw that same face hovering above him.

A nagging pain began to throb in his skull. In the mirror back in his apartment however, he could detect no streaks going up his neck and he resolved to postpone seeing the doctor until later.

For a long time there was no reply from Watson Fay. When the script finally was delivered, Foster, with Spartan deliberation, lit a cigar drew a lamp close to him, and settled himself before beginning to read.

Half an hour later he was still sitting there, a meditative look in his eyes.

He went into the bathroom and took from the medicine cabinet a vial of Lethob, and from a shelf a bottle of Tharnopsis which had been there a long time. The label bore the warning: Do not mix with Lenantropol, either in tincture or granule form. Avoid contact with the skin. Foster found a mortar and pestle and proceeded to blend the contents of the two containers into a yellowish mixture.

He went back to his dictatype and composed a letter.

It was the most difficult piece of correspondence he had ever written. Outwardly it was routine, thanking Watson Fay for the chapter he had sent and discussing the Round-Robin in general, but concealed in every statement was a subliminal command that the reader leave his present position and move due North, according to the points of the 11QR5 compass.

The plan depended upon a number of details: the Lethar mixture must be introduced by skin contact into the reader's bloodstream. The Watson Fay house must have remained unchanged during the years, since Foster had seen it. North must bring the reader out of his study onto the flagstoned walk,

across sixty yards of grounds to the sheer unprotected cliff projecting out over the Xonde Sea.

Careful not to blur the ink, Foster treated the margins and back side of the letter with the Lethar mixture.

He mailed the letter and sat back to wait.

Martha entered the sanctity of his workroom and found him there, doing nothing. Her anger was biting.

"Do you realize no money has come into this house for two months?" she said. "And there you sit like a millionaire! What're you doing about your book?"

"What book?"

"Are you crazy? The book you've been doing with those other writers."

"Oh that." Foster shrugged. "It'll be done presently. As a matter of fact we're on the final episode."

He did not tell her that the last chapter by Watson Fay had been a great disappointment to him. He did not tell her that Fay in the midst of his narrative abruptly had swung into a treatise on the folly of war. What right had he to concern himself with military problems in a media that was not his own? Foster didn't give a damn about planetary relationships and he resented this move of Fay's intensely.

The night of August first was hot and oppressive. Foster had gone to bed early but he lay there unable to court sleep. The skin of his hands where he had touched the drug was inflamed and no amount of washing or ointment he had applied would alleviate it.

He lay there thinking . . . thinking of Watson Fay and the final "trip" he would shortly make. Only one thing saddened Foster. Fay would come to his end unaware of Foster's controlling part in it. He would never know that his impending demise would be the direct result of planned justice for an act he had committed and thought he had got away with ten years before. But he would be aware, tragically, painfully aware of what was happening and he would be unable to help himself. And that at least would supply the delicious taste of revenge for Foster.

About one o'clock Foster finally dozed off, only to awake suddenly, aware of a strange inner sensation. He lay there, fighting it. His eyes were rimmed with sleep but when he peered from them across the room the design on the wallpaper seemed to undulate and form queer shapes and designs. White objects scuttled about between the designs, fighting it appeared to gain freedom and reach him. Superimposed over this visual nightmare were streaks and ribbons

of scarlet and brilliant orange that mounted vertically to the ceiling. And now the whole thing began to coalesce into a great lidless eye that stared at him malevolently.

Foster got out of bed, stepped across to the door and entered the living room. Opposite, french doors led to a small balcony overlooking the street, eight stories below, protected by a wrought-iron railing. As he stood there that strange compulsion to move North swept over him. Like a robot with frozen controls, he paced across the room, tumbling a chair out of his path. He moved to the french doors, thrust them open. A late summer breeze, redolent with the musk of the river, touched his face.

From a distance he heard again the voice of the newsboy: "Washington sends second note."

He saw something floating just beyond the railing . . . a man's face . . . smiling at him . . . the face of Watson Fay—he recognized it now for a certainty—as it had looked ten years ago during the plagiarism trial, mocking and triumphant. And now two hands joined the head and they motioned to him, indolently to and fro . . .

The beckoning hands joined with the North compulsion to form an irresistible urge. Foster reached out and touched the railing . . . climbed it and swept his arms into space, teetering there . . .

An inquest was held of course and among the testimonies given was that of Updyke, the postman.

"I don't know what Foster was up to," Updyke said, "but for the past three months he'd been receiving letters and envelopes—all sent by him and returned to him, addressees unknown. This included mail he had directed to Watson Fay who the postal department on 11QR5 reported had been dead these five years . . ."

As for the other addresses, after a search through Foster's papers, Martha testified they were actually five pseudonyms used by Foster for his own writings long before she had married him.

THE WHITE PINNACLE

Start Recording:

It was in late January while coasting along the Asteroids' rim that Kalhern got the idea of putting in at Renit-4. I was against it at once, but Kalhern was getting old—he was space-tired and anxious to set his feet on firm soil. Nevertheless Renit-4 was described in the *Pilot* as "Unexplored" with the warning to navigators, "Land at own risk."

We were six months out of New Chicago with a hold full of pagcite and other radioactive ore samples. We had satisfied the average requirement for a Galactic Mining exploratory cruise, and I could see no reason for risking our necks unnecessarily at this stage of the trip.

Kalhern, however, had his mind made up.

"The *Pilot* says traces of arquium might be found there," he said.

"We've got a quarter ton of arquium already."

"This may be higher grade."

So that was that. We altered course and two days later, landed on Renit-4. Right away we ran into the trouble I had foreseen. Descending, one of our landing-gravitators failed, and the ship, out of thrust, caromed against a rocky perpendicular, shearing off two deflector auricles and opening a sizeable rent in the forward embayment. A good week of repair work confronted us.

Kalhern however, was not disturbed. "There's an atmosphere here and vegetation," he said. "By Godfrey, what more do we want?"

I could have answered that, but I didn't. Atmosphere, there was, but the vegetation gave one a headache to look at it. Trees thirty meters tall, resembling giant cat-tails, growing in geometrically spaced clumps, and between them wide swales of violet-hued ipso grass that rippled like silk when the

wind struck it. Eye-like flowers, replete with ochre iris and pink cornea that seemed to stare back at you even from a distance. Directly before the ship was a high escarpment, blood-red in color, and to the east, approximately a mile off, a white something probed the sky like a slender obelisk.

I pointed this out to Kalhern, but he had already seen it.

"A priathe outcropping probably. Might even be chalk. We'll investigate it later."

We stayed pretty close to the ship that first day. Carson Shores, our navigator, whose name always reminded me of a real estate development, made an examination of the ship's damage, and then he, Stewart and three crewmen set about to make repairs. Hammond, silent and emotionless as always, got out his camera and began to take pictures. And McKay shuffled about, doing little or nothing.

McKay was the giant of our outfit, a six-feet-five hulk of a man whose brain had not quite kept pace with his body. His great strength came in handy, handling the electrolic drills and pneumatic hammers our work required. But his interest lay in one field only.

Perfume! That was McKay's hobby. The big fellow nearly drove the rest of us mad with the bottles, philters, and vials he was always dragging out of his cabin and spreading over the mess table. Oddly, his experiments in the past had had some professional results. He had sold manufacturing rights to two scents: a spicy cologne he had distilled from the root of the canal-flower of south-eastern Mars and a lingering musk-like aroma whose source was the dehydrated marsh-soil of central Venus.

Now as I stood there, adjusting the bracket of the searchlight, I saw McKay suddenly turn and grow tense. His nostrils twitched and a gleam entered his eyes.

A moment later I caught it too. Coming on the night wind, faint at first, but gradually growing stronger, was a cloying flower-like smell. A sickish sweet odor that crept down my lungs like smoke. It was an alien smell, a scent of death and it brought with it a feeling of unexplained terror.

Kalhern emerged from the ship's hatch and stopped short before me. A paroxysm of coughing seized him as the smell reached his nostrils.

"In heaven's name, what is it?" he said. His voice rose to a shout. "McKay, where are you going?"

The big man seemed not to hear. Head erect, like a robot whose controls have jammed, he strode rapidly out across the ellipse of artificial light and disappeared into the wall of darkness. For a time we heard his heavy footsteps

grating on the gravel. Then that sound died off and there was only silence . . . and the smell.

"McKay!" Kalhern called again. His fists clenched. "The fool! There's no telling what he'll run into out there."

As suddenly as it had come, the smell was gone. The paralysis of mind and body which had held me passed on, and in sixty seconds I had the searchlight mounted on the bracket and was turning it on the swivel. The two foot wide shaft of white radiance ate into the blackness, probed outward like a groping hand, etched every mound and rock into sharp relief but revealed no sign of McKay.

Kalhern went into action at once. He roused Shores, Stewart, and Hammond from within the ship. He posted Shores at the searchlight, and then the three of us paced slowly to the extreme end of the aisle of light and moved with it as Shores arced it slowly from left to right. At intervals Kalhern cupped his hands and called McKay's name. There was no response.

"The damned fool!" he said again. "I gave strict orders no one was to go twenty yards beyond the ship until we could get the Tester going."

Hammond fingered his gun quietly. "I'll scout around and bring him back, if you say so."

Kalhern shook his head. "You'll do nothing of the sort," he snapped. "You know the landing rules: 'No crewman or officer shall venture into uncharted territory on a Class C planet until that territory has first been quartered with a Tester.' Well, this is a Class C planet. By Godfrey, I'm taking no chances!"

We divided the rest of the night into watches, setting off Regal flares at intervals of every ten minutes, but there was no sign of McKay. Dawn came at last, bringing with it no lessening of the tenseness that was mounting within each of us. Somehow the red escarpment seemed redder and the violet swales a deeper more alien color than before. And off to the left the white pillar stood, reflecting the sunlight, a monument to the mystery which surrounded us.

I tried not to think about McKay, but the absence of his cheery "Good morning, Mr. Judson; it's a very nice day, isn't it, Mr. Judson?" hit me hard, and at breakfast even emotionless Hammond was visibly affected by the sight of the big man's empty chair.

"Of course, all he did was walk away under his own power," said Kalhern. "There's no reason to believe yet that harm has come to him."

His forced cheerfulness fooled no one. We all had been on too many strange planets in the past.

And then at high noon, like a prodigal son returning, McKay came back.

He came out of the swale grass, stumbling drunkenly, hands hanging loosely at his sides. When he reached the ship, we saw that those hands were dripping blood, that his tunic was ripped, torn, and dirt-stained and that there was an ugly welt under his right eye. Kalhern, his anger at the big man's disobedience overcome for the moment by his relief, seized him by the hand.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Where did you go?"

It was five minutes at least before McKay could speak. When he did his voice was hoarse and trembling.

"I caught one," he gasped. "It tried to kill me. It's got the strength of ten men, but I caught one."

"Caught what?" said Kalhern. "What tried to kill you?"

"A wafer-head. That's what it looked like anyway. A wafer-head!"

Kalhern glanced at me and shook his head. "Put him to bed," he ordered. "Give him a couple of cerebra-tabs, five grain. Maybe he'll snap out of it later."

That afternoon we got the Tester into operation and made ready for our first survey. Fundamentally we were still on duty for Galactic Mining, and ore samples were our paramount interest. Stewart as geologist of the party had been eyeing that white pinnacle with interest. He wanted to go there first.

We did that. With Kalhern driving and myself chanting aloud the dial readings, we set the Tester moving over the virgin ground.

"Gravity thirty-five, air temperature 24 C., water sixty to a hundred feet, paldine five, sub soil organic twenty . . ."

The dials showed nothing unusual or dangerous to man.

As we crossed and criss-crossed our way forward the white pinnacle slowly grew in height and clarity before us. I estimated it to be seventy meters high and fifteen meters or less in girth. The surface was a dull grayish white, resembling chalk, as Kalhern had said, and yet at intervals high-lights appeared, reflecting the sunlight with a dazzling sheen. Midway up the side of this pyramid was a series of black marks, but whether they were part of a natural formation or hieroglyphics, the work of intelligent life, I could not tell at that distance.

But as we drew ever nearer, that same tautness, that same terror I had experienced the night before welled over me. It was as if a sub-sonic chord were striking my ears steadily in a register too low for me to hear.

Then Kalhern braked the Tester to a stop and we were directly before the white pinnacle. We got out and walked around it slowly; the swale grass and other vegetation grew to the very edge of it on three sides; on the fourth side,

which was the side nearest the low flanking cliff, there was a lane about three feet wide which bore no growth but was exposed cleanly to the bare gravel.

"Looks almost like a conduit from the cliff proper," Kalhern said reflectively. "What do you make of it, Stewart?"

The geologist had his little hammer out and was tapping lightly against the stone shaft. "Hard as flint," he said. "I never saw anything like it before. It's obviously nature formed, and yet it's so geometrically perfect it looks almost as if it were carved."

Kalhern nodded. "Judson," he said to me, "make a copy of those marks around the middle, and we'll study them later. . . . By Godfrey!"

His eyes had turned to the cliffside, up to where a low outcropping and scattered pile of boulders formed a low shelf. Spread-eagled there, fastened to rock jags by strips torn from a GM tunic, was a creature about three feet in height with a curiously repulsive body and a flat wafer head. Its two lidless eyes watched us in baleful silence.

"So McKay was telling the truth after all," Kalhern said slowly. "Only this thing doesn't look particularly dangerous. Help me take it down."

The creature snarled wickedly, but made no effort to resist us. Stewart quickly passed a rope around it and led it off snarling and spitting, to the Tester where he secured it in the rear seat. We lingered a moment longer, staring at the strange white pinnacle. It was only when we were about to leave that Stewart made his discovery.

I remember that at the moment it struck me that Stewart was deliberately playing up an insignificant detail in the jealous hope of magnifying his own powers of observation. Neither Kalhern nor I realized then the vital importance of his words.

"Look here," Stewart said. "There are two flowers on this stem."

Kalhern stared. "So what?" he demanded.

Stewart was on his knees now, studying the gravel lane on the fourth side of the pinnacle. "And every pebble has a duplicate of the same size and shape. Take a squint out there," he continued, pointing to the expanse of open savannah. "Notice how every grass stem has but a single blossom until you reach a point forty or fifty feet from this column; then there are double blossoms. Now look at the cliffside. Look closely."

My eyes followed his gaze, and for a moment I saw nothing unusual. Then crevices, rocks and outcroppings arranged themselves in my vision and I understood the significance of Stewart's discovery. Every feature of the flanking cliff had its duplicate feature; every discernible mark or protuberance to

the left of the column had an identical mark or protuberance to the right. It was as if a stereo photograph had been taken and the negative superimposed against the backdrop before us.

Kalhern stared and his eyes slowly widened in amazement. Then he turned to look at the creature secured in the Tester.

"Some freak of volcanic action probably. Come on, I want to get back to the ship."

We placed the Renitian—as Kalhern promptly named our captive—in one of the ship's storerooms, gave it food and water and left it alone for two hours to adjust to its imprisonment. During those two hours excitement ran high among our company. But it wasn't the presence of this alien creature alone that accounted for our interest; nor was it Stewart's description of the strange phenomena surrounding the white pinnacle. It was rather Stewart's subsequent discovery which he made accidentally while looking over the two Micro latent counters with which the Tester was equipped.

The geologist reported that delayed readings of the instruments showed conclusively that somewhere in the vicinity of the pinnacle there was a deposit of radioactive ore of undreamed richness. Furthermore—and here Stewart's eyes took on a gleam of unmasked avarice—if he had read the instruments correctly, that ore was something new, an unclassified element giving off Gantzen rays in addition to the usual alpha, beta and gamma rays.

"Of course I can't be sure yet," Stewart said. "But all indications are that we've struck something big."

Kalhern took this information stoically. He smoked his pipe in thoughtful silence. Then he got up and led the way to the storeroom where, while the rest of us watched in silence, he attempted to communicate with the Renitian.

He tried the Gabre method of inter-racial communication first. When that failed to elicit any response, he tried a number of jargons which he had picked up in his years of roaming the spaceways. As a final effort he made several attempts with sign language.

Without result. The Renitian watched us calculatingly but gave no sign that it understood. Yet there was intelligence in those lidless eyes and physically at least the thing's wafer skull appeared to have a large brain capacity.

It was not until Carson Shores said with disgust, "Turn it loose. The thing's only an animal," that the creature reacted. It faced Shores with malevolent hatred and then it gave off the smell.

The same sickish sweet smell that had drifted out of the blackness the night before. With it came that same feeling of inner tenseness, of cold terror.

Kalhern stood up. "We can do nothing more here," he said. "We'll decide what to do with it in the morning."

And so we spent our second night on Renit-4. How the past events affected the others of our company I did not know but, for my part, I found sleep impossible. The heavy silence weighed on my ears after months of listening to the drone of the ship's motors, the absolute quiet of this planet seemed a tangible thing, without chirps of a cricket or call of a nightbird to break the monotony.

At two o'clock I got up and sat down at my desk. Before me was the torn page from my notebook with the scribbled copy of the hieroglyphics that adorned the middle of the white pinnacle.

I've had quite a little experience deciphering unknown writings in the past which is probably why Kalhern turned the job over to me.

The hieroglyphics were semi-picture writing, conveying thoughts in generalities rather than exact oral translations. In a vague way they suggested the cliff markings of Mars' red desert country but with a difference. Where the Mars writings were "passive" with the preciseness of an old race, these were bold and almost dashing, the stigma of a form of life in its youth.

As near as I could translate, the legend on the white pinnacle read:

Know you by the powers of the infinite that the phenomena of all creation must be the same to two beholders who in themselves move with a tempo of motion relative to one and to each other. Know you also that whereas the unseen life-in-a-rock is the smallest known fragment of creation there can be no means of telling its place in the moons of zero in a given moon. The rock giveth and the rock taketh away.

It struck me that philosophically here were two astounding statements, manifesting an advanced state of culture. The first was nothing more than a pure Einsteinian declaration, the concept of absolute motion through space. As for the second, if we substituted "time" for "moons" and "space" for "zero" what did we have but Heisenberg's application of the Quantum Theory to the position of an electron? The last eight words meant nothing to me.

I turned out the light and walked across the room to one of the ports. There were no clouds this night and the sky was spangled with stars; strange constellations burned brightly, casting an eerie glow over the land.

Somewhere out there there must be other creatures like the one imprisoned in our storeroom; they must have villages, houses, families. What were their thoughts, their fears, their beliefs? What would they do when they discovered

one of their number was missing? Or were they already aware of our presence, watching us . . . waiting . . . ?

With the morning the giant McKay was himself again and beyond a few scratches and cuts where the Renitian's talons had left their mark, he betrayed no ill effect from his experience. Neither did he evince any interest when I told him we had found his captive and brought it here to the ship.

He looked at me dully, then turned and stared off in the direction of the white pinnacle.

"We've got to leave here, Mr. Judson," he said. "We've got to leave here right away. This is an evil place, Mr. Judson."

"Nonsense, McKay, Stewart says this is the richest planet we've visited yet. He says there are indications of a new radioactive ore in the cliff back of the pinnacle."

But the big man shook his head. "This place is bad," he said slowly. "I can feel it."

At noon mess Kalhern presented a plan of action which he stated quietly was to be followed to the letter. First of all, he said, we would release the Renitian unharmed. Next, no less than two men would post guard about the ship at all times. Third, a trip would be made in the Tester to see if any native village were in the immediate vicinity. If there were, we would make no attempt to contact them but would simply observe for war-like activities. Then, and not until then, was Stewart's ore to be mined. And as soon as a representative sample of the deposit was obtained, we would clear out and head for our Earth base.

And then Kalhern voiced almost the same fear McKay had.

"Things have been going a little too smoothly," he said. "There's an—well, call it an atmosphere—about this place I don't like."

At two o'clock that afternoon Carson Shores, Hammond and I entered the Tester. Half an hour before, the Renitian had been brought out of the ship, escorted to the edge of the camp and there freed of his bonds. The native stood uncertainly for a moment, still watching us with those lidless eyes. Then he slowly headed into the swale grass and a moment later was lost to view.

Now as the Tester got under way taking the same general direction, Shores suddenly spoke. "Hold it a moment. I left my reading glasses in the ship."

He was out of the Tester, running back to the camp before I could stop him. In the silence while we waited his return, Hammond swore.

"The idiot! What's he need reading glasses for out here?"

Shores came back breathlessly. "It's all right. I just wanted to be sure I hadn't lost them. They were on my desk." He smiled at Hammond's muttered profanity. "I left them there."

We headed east, the Tester ploughing through the swale grass effortlessly. Far ahead low rolling hills broke the skyline, but they seemed to recede and dwindle away as we went on. At three o'clock we sighted the first animal life, a high flying bird of tremendous proportions. The thing apparently had a repulsive saurian head though at that height it was impossible to see it clearly.

The bird made no attempt to attack, and we went on. Then suddenly we were atop a low hillock, looking down into a shallow ravine. In the center of that ravine, arranged in the form of a circle was a double row of clay buildings and passing to and from amongst them were groups of Renitians, some smaller, some slightly larger than the one we had captured, but all with those curious wafer heads. The buildings were all cube-shaped, identical in size, interconnected by a narrow overhead gallery cut in the form of battlements with upraised nodules every few yards surmounted by flat disc-like caps. The meaning behind these architectural contrivances was not clear though it seemed safe to assume they constituted some kind of defense. Before each building stood a flat panel, many-colored and bearing inscriptions in the same strange writing that adorned the white pinnacle.

For twenty minutes we remained there in silence, watching. Through binoculars we saw the natives go about their routine household tasks, but we observed no sign of war-like activity. Neither did we see any evidence of weapons.

Then quietly we swung the Tester about and headed back for camp.

It was when we came into sight of the ship that Shores suddenly reached in his pocket and uttered an exclamation.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"My glasses . . ." he faltered. "I . . . I left them on my desk in the ship. I know I did . . . And yet I've got them here now . . ."

Hammond grinned. "You get like that after you've been on these trips enough times . . ."

But Shores was deadly serious. The moment the Tester drew up before the ship he leaped out and headed for his quarters. A moment later he reappeared, a dazed look on his face. "I must be getting dotty. I could have sworn I left those glasses on my desk."

When Kalhern learned of the close proximity of the native village he frowned and tapped his pencil on his desk thoughtfully.

"We can only hope that the trouble we had here while you were gone won't arouse them against us," he said.

"Trouble? What trouble?"

"That damned fool, McKay! He sneaked away from camp again, caught up with the Renitian and cut off his scent gland."

"He did what?"

"He discovered that the source of that strange smell the native gave off was a small external sac located at the base of the thing's skull. You know how mad McKay is about new sources of perfume. It's practically an obsession with him. The idiot tracked the Renitian after it had left our camp and deliberately amputated that gland. He claimed the native felt no pain, never even let out a peep; but that's beside the point. I've ordered McKay confined to quarters."

Dusk changed to darkness and the long night snailed by. I lay in the warm vitiated air of my cabin—the ventilators had broken down, and we hadn't got around to repairing them as yet. About midnight a low pulsation from far off drifted in the open port. The sound was at the limit of my hearing range, and for a time I thought it was drums—native drums—but after a time it died away, and I fell asleep.

At breakfast the first of the incredible events took place. I was drinking my second cup of coffee when it happened. Stewart was just reaching for the sugar bowl when his eyes happened to turn toward the open port. He stared, then turned to Kalhern.

"I thought you had confined McKay to quarters," he said quietly.

The chief looked up questioningly.

"Because if you did, he apparently didn't think much of the idea. Take a look out there."

Kalhern looked, kicked back his chair and froze. "By Godfrey!"

The port opened on to the east half of the camp. Walking out of the swale grass toward the ship was McKay, his tunic buttoned up to the throat, his hands hanging stiffly at his sides. He looked to neither side but came on at that same slow mechanical pace.

There was something utterly strange about his presence there, apart from his being out of the ship. Staring at him, I got the impression that I was viewing a scene through a microscope.

The figure reached a point where the trodden-down grass marked the edge of camp; it stopped there as if waiting. Below us we heard steps in the outer corridor; the outer exit hatch creaked as it opened and closed. *And then a second McKay came into view as he emerged from the ship!*

I wasn't dreaming. Out of the corner of my eye I could see every man about the mess table poise rigid, eyes riveted on the scene framed in the open port.

The second McKay advanced across the camp toward its waiting counterpart. Detail for detail, lineament for lineament, feature for feature, they were duplicates of each other. It was as if a giant mirror had been placed out there at the edge of the swale grass and the reflecting image prevented from movement.

And now the second McKay was abreast of the first McKay. An instant they stood there, facing each other, the face of the figure facing us betraying no sign of astonishment, the eyes discernible even at that distance as calm and matter-of-fact.

Then the two figures merged and blended into one. The action was simple and complete; one moment there were two, the next there was one McKay standing motionless and erect in the clear morning sunlight.

It turned, that composite figure and began to walk slowly out and away from the ship. Not a word about the mess table was spoken as we watched it recede step by step, heading in a general direction for the white pinnacle . . .

Then the spell was broken. As one man we rushed for the exit hatch. Kalhern leaped into the Tester, motioned Hammond and me to join him, and a moment later we roared out of camp. As we raced on, I strained my eyes, looking for McKay, but I saw no sign of him. Then I did see him. Incredible as it seemed he had almost reached the white pinnacle. The minutes seemed like hours until we came abreast of that white column. When we did, McKay was standing motionless directly before it, head tilted back, staring at its top.

"McKay!" yelled Kalhern.

The big man didn't answer, didn't move. Hammond ran to his side, seized his arm.

Like a dummy removed from its support, McKay toppled forward and fell face downward. White-faced, Hammond reached for the man's wrist, felt for a pulse.

"He's dead!" he said hoarsely.

We buried McKay where he lay, read a simple requiem, and silently made our way back to camp. A hundred questions were surging through my brain. In Kalhern's cabin-office an hour later I put those questions into words:

"Do you think whatever it was that killed McKay had as its source the white pinnacle and do you think those damned natives had anything to do with it?"

Kalhern looked old and haggard as he sat at his desk mechanically filling his pipe.

"Yes," he said shortly.

"Yes what?"

The chief struck a match, lit his pipe with trembling fingers. "I didn't say anything about it before, Judson, but I saw something out there at the pinnacle. You'll remember that there is a lane of gravel leading from that white shaft to the face of the cliff proper, and that Stewart mentioned its looking almost like a conduit. Well at the base of that cliff I saw something the rest of you overlooked."

I sat in silence waiting for him to continue.

"I found a dial!" he said quietly. "A crude mechanism set in some kind of a stone panel but nonetheless a dial."

"Meaning what?" I said.

Kalhern spread his hands. "Meaning almost anything. A retractable shield perhaps that can turn off and on the radiations from the radioactive ore deposit. I might even suggest that the pinnacle is the work of intelligent beings, a sort of filter through which those radiations can be transmitted or directed."

"But our observations of the Renitians showed no such mechanical ability."

"The Renitians of the present, no. But don't forget this is an old planetoid. Life here may have retrogressed. The pinnacle may be only an artifact of an earlier race."

I thought this over for several minutes. "Granted that all may be true," I said, "how do you account for the duplication around the pinnacle of things organic and inorganic?" Even as I said this, I remembered the incident of Shore's glasses.

Kalhern shrugged. "My atomic science is elementary," he said. "Stewart has said that the radioactive ore is something different—a new element. Who can say what this radiation—controlled radiation will do? It may have actually affected McKay's body in the manner we saw or conceivably it might have affected us, our vision. Remember Planck's Quantum Theory and the modern postulations of Altvolk and Janner? And Thorpe's thesis on transmutation. Matter is like light. In one aspect it behaves as if it were constituted of waves; in another it appears to consist of particles. And when a body or an object is bombarded by radiations of energy, including the little-known Gantzen rays. . . ." Kalhern spread his hands significantly.

"Then you're going to give up the idea of taking samples from the ore deposit?"

"No, I'm not." Kalhern banged his fist down upon the desk. "I've been with Galactic Mining thirty years, and I've never flubbed an assignment yet. We'll take reasonable precautions, of course."

Reasonable precautions included shots for radiation poisoning for every man on the ship and strict orders never to leave the ship without a lead protected suit. Before resuming our mining activities Kalhern took a blaster out to the white pinnacle and completely destroyed the strange stone dial.

The ore was deeper down than we had anticipated. Our electrolic drills cut through layers of metamorphic rock, granite, gneiss, schist and slate and an igneous formation which Stewart said was different from anything he had ever seen before. At intervals Stewart took samples of the slag back to his laboratory cabin in the ship and subjected it to his tests.

There was no sign of activity on the part of the Renitians. Once Kalhern and I thought we detected traces of that strange perfume, borne on the night wind, but the scent passed on, and we agreed we must have been mistaken.

On the first of February Kalhern announced it was his birthday and with a sentimental smile called a halt to our labors during the afternoon. We sat around in the ship's lounge and took it easy. Shores and Hammond were playing *Star-Credit* with two decks of cards, and Shores was laughing as he raked in his winnings.

I remember it occurred to me that this was the first laughter any of us had indulged in since our landing on Renit-4, but it was short-lived. Shores began to unfasten his tunic at the throat.

"It's hot in here," he said. "Don't you fellows think it's hot?"

Suddenly he got to his feet and headed for the exit hatch. None of the others paid any attention, but on impulse I followed him.

Reaching the hatch, I was in time to see Shores cross the camp compound with slow deliberate steps. My eyes lifted to the edge of the swale grass beyond, and froze. Waiting for him there, arms akimbo, was a figure of horrifying familiarity.

It was Carson Shores in duplicate!

As had happened with McKay, the first Carson Shores reached and merged with its counterpart; and then the composite figure turned and headed for the white pinnacle.

Our number had been reduced by one more.

From here on any departure from logical continuity in this narrative must

be excused. The madness which had beset us became too fast-paced for rational explanation or description.

On February second, close on the death and burial of Carson Shores, Kalhern gave orders to leave Renit-4. This reversal of decision was the result of Hammond's and my insistence, for, as Hammond argued, charting and reporting the ore deposit should be sufficient to establish its discovery with us.

I can say now that somehow I never expected the ship to leave. Yet when Kalhern fiddled vainly at the controls and announced in a flat voice, "The motors are dead," the cold horror of the situation hit me hard.

The chief, however, was indomitable. Under his direction we fell to work, frantically checking motor conduits. The third, fourth and fifth of February passed without further incident, marked only by our ceaseless labors.

On the sixth Hammond, Stewart and two crewmen drove out to the spring to replenish our water supply which was running low. They didn't return. We found the Tester abandoned and what seemed to be tracks leading off into the swale grass. Kalhern deliberated the situation a long time before announcing his decision.

"I'll take the rest of the crewmen and go after them," he said quietly. "That will leave you alone in the ship. You will keep the hatch closed and open it under no circumstances until our return. The ship is impregnable, and you should have no trouble here."

In vain I argued. "They may have sighted some new form of animal life. A thousand things may have drawn them away from the Tester. Give them time to return."

But Kalhern was adamant. "I like Hammond," he said simply. "If it's in my power, I'm going to bring him back."

... I am alone in the ship. Kalhern and the crewmen have now been gone thirteen hours and still there is no sign of them. I am sitting here before the central port, staring out across the camp compound. The violet ipso grass undulates in the wind like a lazy sea, and the cattail trees stand stiff and stark against the saffron sky. Off to the east rises the slender obelisk-like white pinnacle.

As I wait, the truth keeps gnawing at a back corner of my mind—that Kalhern and the crewmen will not return, that they have gone to their doom like the others somewhere out there.

Even now, at intervals, a peculiar blur forms in my eyes when I look in the direction of the white pinnacle. That blur will grow ... will develop, I know, until. ...

can see it now. The mist has cleared, and a human figure walks out of the swale, heading for the camp compound. It is a tall figure with sloping shoulders and a Galactic Mining tunic unbuttoned at the throat. Its stride is slow, inexorable, and as it approaches, an overwhelming lure rises up within me like a great inner sickness.

It is myself. . .

NOTE: *This recording, which ends here, was found by the captain of the freighter, Evening Star, when that ship made a forced landing on Renit-4 for repairs. Although its authenticity has been questioned, it is claimed to be the only existent answer to the century-old disappearance of the GM cruiser, Alencon, and as such has been filed in the historical folios of the Interspatial Institute at New Chicago.*

MR. IPER OF HAMILTON

"Come, follow me into the tunnel of oblivion and I will disenchant you."

—RICES'

Palimpsest and Fragments

Actually the strange one in this story is Mr. Paxton Iper—he pronounced it Eeper—though everyone regarded Herman Watt as the oddity. Herman was odd all right but in a different way.

Mr. Iper arrived in Hamilton Corners in a work-cruiser on a sultry Monday morning in October and, after talking with the sheriff a half-hour, drifted around to the shady side of Sam's gas station where some of us sit and smoke and pass the day. Right away he puzzled us.

He introduced himself as territorial representative for the Third Estate Environmental Council and said he had come to make a test of the town's water supply. "Understand you've had several cases of Magnetic Fever," he said.

"If you mean summer complaint, we get that every year 'bout this time."

He nodded. "You get your water from the river, I understand."

"That's right, and we've got one of the finest filtration plants in the state."

He was a small man with hair so black it looked as if it had been stamped out of a piece of blotting paper. His eyes, cat-green, had a trick of slowly closing, then blinking rapidly. He wore a copper medallion with the embossed design of a clarinet, apparently the emblem of some music society.

Presently his gaze turned across the road to the fenced-in corner of Watt's meadow.

"What's that?" he demanded.

We all smiled. You couldn't help but smile when a stranger first set eyes on Herman Watt's "machine". Though we always sobered up quickly when we thought of the tragedy behind it.

Paxton Iper was looking at a heavy platform about four feet square upon which were mounted three triangular metal boxes. Projecting from one of

these boxes was a wheel-gear connected with a chain to a rusty burned-out five-horse motor. At each corner of the wooden platform a steel rod was fixed upright and these rods supported a sort of helix of twisted copper wire. Half a dozen white porcelain insulators, positioned aimlessly, gleamed in the sunlight. A panel, covered with defunct dials and gauges stood to one side.

This was Herman Watt's "machine", put together during his convalescence from the accident at the Fission Mill.

Even before his accident Herman had been no mental genius. But after he came into contact with that conduit stopping his heart for a matter of minutes before respiration could be applied the resultant brain damage left him a cross between a vegetable and a man. Parabonic hypnotherapy had done wonders for him but it couldn't completely restore his blood-starved think-box.

The fact that the machine did nothing seemed not to concern him. Referring to it as his "device," he always spoke of it as "nearing completion" and accepted gravely "parts" for it that were proffered him from time to time by sympathetic town citizens.

"What's that?" Mr. Iper asked again, looking toward the machine.

Somebody told him the story. While he listened he idly took from his pocket a pair of folding-scissors and picked up a newspaper one of us had discarded. He folded the paper an odd way and began to cut a chain of paper dolls' joined together by their outstretched arms.

Just then, the subject of our conversation, Herman Watt, joined our group.

"Hi, Herman," we said.

"It's a nice day," Herman said, looking up at the sky.

We agreed that the weather was tolerable.

In the silence that followed Mr. Iper sat staring at Herman Watt with unblinking eyes. His fingers moved to his medallion and began to caress it as he said softly:

"Sele mobas ante lium."

For a week the stranger continued his investigation of Hamilton Corners, if you could call it an investigation. Aside from taking samples every morning from the taps at the water tower and the filtration plant and filling a big test tube every afternoon with water from the river, he didn't seem to do much but ask questions. He did open an office above Garson's drug store and slept there too. What seemed particularly to interest him was the Selfridge Addition at the north end of town. The Selfridge Addition was composed of ultra plastic homes in the seventy-five thousand dollar class, surrounding the Mason Selfridge mansion. They and their residents were a unit apart. Except to pay

taxes, they had no contact with the rest of the town. They had their own wells, their own sewage disposal, even their own power system. In the language of the sheriff they were "a bunch of snobs". "And, the worst snob of them all," he said "is Mason Selfridge, president of the Fission Mill."

Thereafter Mr. Iper drove his work-cruiser to the various homes in the Addition, remained inside each a half hour or so, then came out, red-faced and tense with anger. Not until October 15th, however, did he make public his report. It went something like this:

The Fission Mill, a dozen miles out of town, used "heavy" water, and other elopsi-chemicals in its operations and dumped the residue in the river. In spite of the Hamilton filtration plant the water remained contaminated when it poured from the faucets of the town's houses. The only reason there weren't more cases of Magnetic Fever was because a lot of the people who drank the water had developed a tolerance for it. But that tolerance would disappear as the contamination grew.

The home of Mason Selfridge and the other houses of the Addition got their water from deep electro-hydron wells and this water was pure. But neither Selfridge nor the other Addition residents would consent to share their water with the rest of the townsfolk.

In frustration Mr. Iper interviewed Mason Selfridge at his Mill office, queried him on the possibility of underwriting a bond issue to finance a series of wells for the town proper.

Selfridge shook his head. "Certainly not," he said. "I may live within the confines of the town, but I have no connection with it at all."

"But it's your mill that's contaminating the water supply."

"That's a matter of question," Selfridge said. "Besides the town has a filtration plant."

Next day there were three more cases of Magnetic Fever—old Doc Bentle had finally come around to Mr. Iper's diagnosis—and by late afternoon the widow Edwina Woods had succumbed. But Mr. Iper didn't quarantine the town nor stop the use of the water. "I have no authority to do that," he said in his room over the drug store where several of us had gone to ask him to contribute to the flower-fund for the Edwina Woods' funeral. He put aside the clarinet he had been playing and stopped the metronome on the table with an air of shy embarrassment. "No," he repeated, "I have no authority to condemn the water supply or anything else. I'm just a—survey man."

Two days after the posting of the Iper report the town council held an emergency general meeting. The mayor was there, the sheriff, Doc Bentle,

Druggist Garson, as well as Paxton Iper who, seated at the speakers' table, amused himself by cutting endless rows of dancing dolls, some out of paper, some out of foil. There was something odd about the foil dolls. Although he worked the scissors around a single pattern, the folded figures always came out half with skirts, half with trousers; that is to say, half boy-dolls, half girl-dolls. Herman Watt was there too, long legs thrust out before him.

The meeting was hot and heavy. The water contamination was discussed pro and con but it all ended with no decisions. As we were starting to leave Mr. Iper motioned Herman to his side, "I've got something for you," he said.

He reached under the table and brought up his finish-scratched metronome. He fastened a string to the top end of the measure-beating arm, the other end of the string to one of his chains of foil dolls and then with a flip of his finger started the metronome. The dolls came to sudden life. With each swing of the timing-arm the silver images appeared to kick up their heels in a gay rigadon.

Herman Watt broke out in a grin of pleasure. "For me?" he said.

Mr. Iper nodded. "For your machine."

Next morning Mason Selfridge phoned the sheriff. The voice of the fission mill president shook with anger.

"Do you know what some of your fine citizens did?" he demanded. "They threw a barrellfull of junk down my well. Just because I refused to turn it into a public watering place. I want to know what you're going to do about it."

"Junk?" repeated the sheriff. "In your well?"

"In the ornamental one with the pagoda roof in the front grounds."

"I see," the sheriff said vaguely. He hesitated. "Well . . . I'll put a man on it right away."

It was true all right. Somebody had thrown a lot of metal and wood down the Selfridge well. Much of it had lodged half way down, wedged against the side walls. But the sheriff did a double take when he saw the nature of that material. It was Herman Watt's machine!

"Now," said the sheriff, "who'd do a thing like that?"

He leaned farther out over the well and saw something he hadn't seen the first time.

The machine was wedged half way down all right but it hadn't been dropped or thrown there. It must have been lowered by a rope fastened to a hook which had been swung free when the machine had stopped its descent. This was made apparent when the sheriff probed the darkness with a powerful

flashlight. He could even see the string of foil dolls and the metronome which Herman had added to the machine.

The sheriff was a reasoning man. He had gone to Aldebaron Tech and he had his own ideas of science and philosophy and metaphysics. Although in his studies—much more complete and offbeat than a man in his occupation normally would have—he had seen many problems dissipated by logic, this time it seemed he was up against a brick wall. Why would anyone throw a mentally incompetent's "machine" down a well? Simply as a reprisal for Mason Selfridge's refusal of the use of his water? That didn't make sense. There were things nearer, lighter and far less cumbersome than the machine. But perhaps the perpetrator had an entirely different reason, had progressed along a different line of thought. Perhaps he wanted to surround the machine with permanent darkness. Wasn't it true that some metaphysical activity required the absence of light to function? But this would presuppose Herman Watt's machine embraced a psychic motivation, a supposition which the sheriff knew simply did not exist.

The sheriff got a rope and a grappling hook from his car, let it down the shaft and attempted to draw the machine to the surface. It wouldn't budge. Nor would it move when the tow truck windlass ordered from Sunderson's Garage tried to pull it out.

These proceedings were watched by Mr. Iper who stood some distance off smoking a cigar.

"What're you doing here?" the sheriff asked. He was annoyed by the presence of the environmental man who seemed to be wherever any activity took place but never seemed to accomplish anything on his own.

"Three more cases of Magnetic Fever," Mr. Iper replied quietly. "I came to ask Mr. Selfridge and the rest of the Addition if they don't reconsider opening their wells to the town."

"Mr. Selfridge won't reconsider anything. He's a stubborn snob."

Iper stroked his jaw slowly. "*Paklo narum colaris*," he said.

The sheriff frowned. "What's that mean?"

"It means 'judge not until you have heard the final answer'."

Mr. Iper walked up the gravel drive and disappeared in the direction of the side entrance.

That was Friday. Tuesday was Hallowe'en and we in the town were thankful we expected no vandalism or trouble from our juveniles beyond perhaps a few soaped windows. As for the kids of the Addition, not even soaped windows were on the docket. Those little darlings were to be enter-

tained at a party at the Selfridge house. No messy Jack-o'-Lanterns there, no painted witches faces. Each of the Addition juveniles was to be furnished with a satin domino mask. All were very correct; all very proper.

Nevertheless a sense of unease settled over the town.

You could feel it underlying the unseasonal warmth of the patchwork sunshine that angled into the streets with a melancholy brilliance. You could sense it in the raucous screams of the jays that soared in the autumn sky.

It rained a little during the afternoon and toward evening a lozenge-shaped cloud-bank began to build up in the southwest. Protected by the wide eave of Sam's station, we sat and talked.

The storm held off. A white moon rose in the east and the October countryside became a woodcut of light and darker shadow. Someone suggested we walk down to Church Lake and see how high the muskrats were building their houses this year. We set off through the town and down the lake road.

Church Lake was a disc of burnished silver in the moonlight. Out from shore were a dozen or more muskrat houses.

"They're bigger all right," said Sam Kellogg. "It's going to be a cold winter."

We listened for a while to the water lapping the piles of the old dock and then we turned and headed back for town.

Abreast of the Selfridge house again we suddenly stopped. Silhouetted against the moonlight the figure of a man stood motionless in the center of the lawn. His head was thrown back, his arms were partially extended and he held in his hands something that looked like a clarinet.

"Say," said Sam Kellogg, "isn't that Mr. Iper?"

His question was never answered. At that moment peals of muffled laughter rang out from the pagoda well. Up from the shaft, like smoke in the moonlight, rose a line of dancing images. The light was deceptive and we were some distance away, but we could see they were cut-out dolls of foil, endowed, it seemed, with magic motion. As they danced over the lawn they grew to life-size, mingled with vagrant wisps of autumn miasma.

Suddenly the door of the Selfridge mansion burst open and a group of domino-masked children rushed into the moonlight. Their legs were swinging, they leaned first to one side and then to the other. When they reached a point directly before the pagoda well their laughing and shouting ceased and one by one they grasped the foil dolls and blended with them. Dolls and children became a unit.

Like a fencing master before his pupils Mr. Iper took a stand before them

and then led them in a zig zag procession across the lawn. Into the road, white as a bone in the moonlight, the children followed like a troupe of ballet performers, swinging with mindless delight. To the end of the lane we watched them go; there they turned and, still following their leader, retraced their steps to the pagoda well. Sweet music poured from Mr. Iper's instrument. Around the well they danced, gesturing in high glee. And then Mr. Iper paused. All in one motion, he climbed up and over the side of the well, raised his hand as in farewell and disappeared in its depths. The dancing children followed. One by one, in blind mimicry they leaped into the well . . . and vanished.

The uproar was nation wide. For two weeks Hamilton Corners overflowed with police, sheriff and deputies, state and NSC—National Secret Constabulary—strangers, reporters and wire press men, to say nothing of TV and radio field-operatives. Mason Selfridge screamed for action, demanded that the children and Mr. Iper be found. But they were not found. And no fingerprints or identity dossier of a Paxton Iper was in existence. There was no such organization as the Third Estate Environmental Council which he claimed to represent. In a search of his room over the drug store a paper was found, written in a language no one had ever seen. Somehow this paper got into the hands of Herman Watt who, of all people, insisted he was able to translate it.

Herman said the printed words at the top meant: *On-location Inter-world Report*. He said the writing went something like this: *Thorough investigation convinces me that these people are deplorably undeveloped. They don't even know the application of the Basic Galactic Law. Action: Removal of offspring for elemental instruction.*

Herman said he wasn't sure but he thought the Basic Galactic Law was the same as the golden rule.

THE WAR OF THE WEEDS

At ten o'clock on the morning of May 3, Harold Field, hired man on the farm of Gustav Peterson in Carver County, Minnesota, was alone in the east field that skirts highway No. 7, seeding corn. Resting a moment to light his pipe, he was suddenly knocked to the ground by a blinding flash of light and a thunderous report.

When he opened his eyes, it was to gaze upon an upraised mound of earth, the center of which was pierced by a circular hole. Field moved forward, examined this hole and, failing to touch bottom, reported the matter to his employer. Peterson, who owned the property, had read something of meteorites and at once telephoned Professor John Calthay, who he remembered was vacationing in Victoria, three miles away. Employer and hired man then took shovels and went out to dig.

By nightfall they finally brought to the surface the object which had apparently fallen from the sky. Tapered at either end, it resembled a large shell, three feet in length, seven and a half inches in width. It was formed of a black, amazingly light metal.

Meanwhile Professor Calthay, who had won lasting fame a year before for his development of the "mechanist" theory of growth, rushed to the Peterson farm and with his assistant, Lawson Gage, was present when the cartridge was opened.

The cartridge and its contents made front-page news in every paper in the country. Inside the shell was found a hollow chamber, filled with a fine granulated matter like ground coffee.

According to Professor Calthay, the Peterson shell reached the Earth from some point in outer space. Its construction pointed obviously to the work of

beings of scientific intelligence, especially the middle core which was formed of coronium, a substance discovered spectroscopically in the corona of the sun and known on this Earth only in a gaseous state.

On May 6th, under Calthay's direction, a quarter acre of the east field was cultivated and harrowed, and one-half of the shell seeds sown broadcast. Results were startling. At the end of a week they had apparently reached full growth, an average height of four feet, six inches.

These weeds—and no other word adequately describes them—were of a peculiar shape. The top half of the plant formed an oblong protuberance, not unlike that of the common cat-tail, save that it was a brittle, reedy material and was hollow with a small opening on one side.

The odd part of it was that from the twelfth to the fifteenth of the month there was little or no wind. And it was not until the sixteenth that Calthay made his discovery.

The professor was sitting on the veranda of the Peterson farmhouse, where he had established his temporary headquarters, when Lawson Gage suddenly broke into his reflections.

"What's that funny noise?"

Calthay drew his pipe from his lips and listened. "I don't hear anything."

"It's stopped now. I've been noticing it for ten minutes. It seems to sound only when the wind blows. There—"

Calthay heard it then. Highpitched and wailing, there swept out of the field to his ears a distinct chord like the vibrato of a hundred clarinets. Then the wind died, and the sound ceased.

Calthay was puzzled. A full minute elapsed before he jerked erect.

"It's the weeds!" he cried. "Come on!"

With Gage at his heels, the white-haired scientist ran down the steps and across the farmyard heading for the east field. Arriving there, the two men drew up short.

Before them, densely packed, the weeds formed a gently undulating carpet. And issuing from the reedlike top blossoms, the droning chord sounded like a great Aeolian harp.

Calthay whipped a knife from his pocket and cut off the nearest stalk. Holding it by the far end, he swung it to and fro over his head. The result was a thin, drawn-out scream.

"What the devil do you make of it?" Lawson Gage asked. He was a tall, dark-haired youth with gimlet eyes and a high broad forehead.

In silence the professor moved slowly through the field, cutting off bloom after bloom, studying them. At length he looked up.

"On the surface, the phenomenon is simple," he said. "The brittle tops of these weeds form an almost perfect musical instrument, and when the wind blows they give forth a sound. Each bloom is of a slightly different size, so the tones vary. But do you notice anything about the sound as a whole?"

Gage listened. "Yes," he said. "It sounds as if a high voice were saying over and over again. 'Doom! Doom!' " And so it did . . .

Continuing his investigation, Calthay found that the weeds reached maturity within the brief period of eight days. A small pouch formed on the stalk then, which opened and spread more seeds to the wind. There was, however, no evidence of the weeds multiplying in any dangerous abundance, a fear which the professor had harbored since he planted the first lot. It was apparent that for successful growth, the earth must be first carefully pulverized.

But by opening these pouches prematurely, planting them in a separate field and making a detailed catalogue of each planting, Calthay made another discovery. The seeds of each weed, he found, propagated a bloom of the exact size and tone-notes of the original.

The scientist mused over this for some time until an idea struck him. Over the dinner table one night in the Peterson house, he spoke to his assistant.

"You used to be interested in music before you turned to science, didn't you?"

Gage nodded. "Directed my college orchestra and learned to play the 'Moonlight Sonata' on the piano," he smiled. "But after that Einstein proved too great a lure. Why?"

Calthay toyed with his fork a moment, then turned to Peterson.

"Is there a fair grounds in the vicinity?" he asked. "Or a place where there's a grandstand that might be available for rent?"

Peterson stared. "Yes," he replied slowly. "The county fair grounds are at Carver, and there's a good-sized grandstand. But what on earth—"

Thereafter for the next three weeks, Calthay and Gage worked in mysterious seclusion. No inkling of what the scientist was up to reached the public until the twentieth of June, when the following notice appeared in the Carver County Clarion:

COSMIC SYMPHONY
CARVER FAIR GROUNDS AT 8 P.M.
ADMISSION FREE

Tonight, assuming meteorological predictions are correct and there will be a

sufficiently strong east wind, I shall attempt a musical experiment with the Peterson space-shell weeds. The weeds which have Aeolian properties have been arranged in order of their proper tunes, with the same attention to harmony as a pipe organ.

By means of draw-shades I propose to control the wind as much as possible and produce ear-pleasing results.

The public is cordially invited to attend the performance.

PROF. JOHN CALTHAY.

The drawshades were seen by the first arrivals at the fair grounds as large sheets of canvas, strung in triple tiers on wires on the west side of the race track. The fact that these canvas sheets had originally been hay-covers, pressed into service from neighboring farms, detracted little from the public's general excitement.

But more than Carver County was present. The afternoon train brought representatives of the Associated Press, in addition to syndicate and feature writers, not to mention Sir Hammond Gore, the eminent music critic of New York City. Also there was Professor Albert de Carta, of the Federal University of Science, and Dr. A. T. Howell, astronomical authority and author of "Can We Reach Mars?"

Inside the race track a curious sight was revealed. The entire oval arena, which was surrounded by a high board fence, was a field of densely packed weeds, four to five feet in height, all of them of a luxuriant green color. In the judges' stand before the grandstand Professor Calthay stood, his white locks streaming in the wind. At his side was the ever-present Lawson Gage.

After a short speech in which he spoke of the Peterson shell and its potentialities, Calthay gave a signal, and five of the draw curtains were pulled back. A steady east wind was blowing. The weeds in the arena began to wave and undulate. An instant later the audience sat electrified.

A high melodious chord vibrated through the evening air. Swelling as the wind increased, it reverberated against the grandstand, growing louder and louder.

Up on the west wall of the race track, under the glare of the floodlights, six men on high ladders stood watching Calthay. After a moment the scientist waved his hand. Five curtains were drawn closed, leaving only one open space at the far side of the field.

Almost imperceptibly at first the song of the weeds changed. Slowly it mounted the octaves into a higher register.

The audience was buzzing with excitement now. Once again Calthay raised

his hand to give a signal. But abruptly a hush fell on the grounds. Above them the crowd noticed for the first time a black storm cloud. The wind returned with a shriek, and simultaneously something happened.

In the grandstand the crowd arose en masse, raced for the exits. Screams rose up. Seats banged, crashed. A woman stood up, tore at her hair. A man flailed his arms and dived headforemost over the rear wall.

"Stop it! For God's sake, stop it!" somebody yelled.

For five minutes the horror continued. Then the screams died, and the crowd quieted. But none lingered to find an explanation of what had happened. Filing in bewilderment out of the fair grounds, they stumbled into their cars and drove away.

Lawson Gage leaned white-faced against the wall of the judges' stand and stared incredulously at Professor John Calthay.

"In heaven's name," he gasped, "what was it?"

The press went wild after that; and Calthay, in response to popular excitement, called a consultation of three scientists: Gedding, Harcolt and Durose, all of the Federal University of Science. Second, he published an admission of his error in the fair grounds incident. It was absurd, he declared, to believe one could control the amount of wind striking the weeds by such elementary means as shifting canvas curtains. The variation in tone must have been caused by other reasons.

But it was Lawson Gage who hit upon the channel leading to the correct answer.

"Undoubtedly," Gage said, "the thing that upset the audience in the Carver grandstand was some form of sound. Now, we know that the highest sound the human ear can detect is forty-one thousand vibrations per second. The sensory portions of our brain do not register a vibration above that until we come to a frequency of three hundred seventy million, when we begin to see rays of red light.

"It therefore stands to reason that ordinary sound, no matter how high-pitched above the ear's receptive capacity would have no effect on the human body.

"But the thing which came from the space-shell weeds may have been more than sound. Isn't it possible that these weeds, as living organisms developed along an entirely different evolutionary scale, might throw off into the vibratory field some form of energy, which we of Earth cannot understand? Add to that that this energy, a botanical one if you will, is insufferable to the human brain, and you have it."

Gage may have had it, but the public didn't. Interest continued under force of newspaper sensationalism, then gradually waned. But on July 16th—to use Professor Calthay's own words—hell broke loose.

Three spies, unquestionably in the service of August Strausvig, dictator of the new Middle European Empire, were captured and tried in a military court at Washington, D. C. Two were executed. The third escaped.

And with the third man's escape was announced the disappearance of the Peterson shell, which it will be remembered had been rescaled with half of the original weed seeds, and had been kept for convenience's sake in the Peterson farmhouse.

In their room that night, Calthay and Gage discussed the situation.

"I should never have left the shell here unguarded," the scientist said, lines of worry showing in his face. "If my simple experiment in the fair grounds had such a terrible effect on people, who is to say what military-minded scientists might not do with those weeds, working along different lines? I tell you, Gage, the possibilities are horrible."

Lawson Gage nodded. "And not only to the world at large, but to ourselves."

Calthay stared. "What do you mean?"

For answer the assistant got up and went out the door. A moment later he returned to place upon the table a small black box, upon the top of which was mounted an ordinary alarm clock.

"This," he said, "in case you don't recognize it, is an infernal machine, a time bomb. I found it under the house last night but decided to say nothing about it until now. The idea, I believe, was to blow us all to kingdom come."

"But why—who—" There was bewilderment in Calthay's voice.

"Nothing so difficult in that," Gage replied. "As you stated, some foreign power evidently recognized in those weeds a potential instrument for world power. They see in you the only possible person who could block their plans. So they intend to remove you and perhaps me, too, from the picture!"

And on the fifteenth of August the weed plague suddenly appeared in Ontario. Overnight, it was reported, vast fields of the strange weeds took growth, sown there by an unknown source. A week later the terrible sickness began to strike down the population. The plague was a form of madness, similar to that which had stricken the audience in the Carver grandstand, but a thousand times more virulent. Death came in a few hours. And the weeds seemed impregnable to all attack.

Life in the United States continued unchanged. And then in mid-winter the plague struck lower California.

"It's just as I feared!" Calthay exclaimed. "Some scientist with a brain trained to military destruction has developed those weed seeds. In their new form, they will grow apparently without the pulverization of the soil which I found necessary. Also they are much more powerful. Nothing seems able to stop them. They propagate faster than man can destroy them. And when they sway in the wind, they give forth their vibrations and that strange energy which no human brain can stand. The one and only thing in our favor is the time of the year. It will be three months before the seeds can take hold in a northern climate."

Gage nodded tensely. "What are we going to do?" he demanded.

The question was never answered. A roaring crash sounded and the reading lamp at Calthay's side burst into fragments.

With a leap the scientist was across to the door, running out into the yard. A tall shadow fled before him. Calthay, his aged legs moving like pistons, raced in pursuit around the west side of the barn and down the lane to the road.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Stop!"

Two more shots cut lanes of fire through the blackness. Calthay heard one of them whistle by a scant inch from his ear. But the shadow did not stop. It continued in long, leaping strides. An instant later the roar of a powerful motor sounded, and a car without headlights sped down the road.

"Close," Gage observed dryly. "If you'd been sitting a little nearer that lamp, that bullet would have got you."

Next day Calthay caught the afternoon train for Flagstaff, Arizona. Arriving at the famous astronomical observatory there, the scientist announced his mission.

"I want to make a spectroscopic analysis of the light from as many stars of the ninth magnitude as I can."

The first sign of the hysteria which was to follow was now finding its way into the press. Weed fields were springing up in California and New Mexico. Nothing seemed able to halt their advance. There were reports of planes sighted over the Mexican border, dropping small containers which opened when they struck the ground. The War Department had reinforced the border patrol, and National Guard units from three states were called into action.

In some localities the weeds apparently had no harmful effect. But in most cases the opposite was tragically the case. The population of entire towns was

wiped out; asylums were being filled with gibbering idiots; inmates who had managed to escape told of a weird sighing chord that seemed to drift on the wind. A chord that brought madness, ending in death.

The United States Department of Agriculture telegraphed Calthay three times, begging him to take charge of the fight against this mysterious menace. Twenty-six of the country's leading botanists were already at work, attempting to produce some means of preventing further germination of the weeds. But Calthay maintained a deliberate silence at his labors in the Flagstaff observatory.

It was on Christmas Eve that Calthay's work was rewarded with a discovery. In observing the spectroscopic color range of a ninth magnitude star, Melaris-A, through the recently invented Johnson magno-spectroscope, he found unmistakable traces of coronium.

Feverishly he turned the gigantic telescope, studying that section of the heavens. An hour later the scientist packed his bags and raced back to the Peterson farm in Carver County, Minnesota.

"Lawson," he said to his assistant a few moments after his arrival, "I've got it. You remember that the center core of that space shell was made of coronium. Now, whereas all matter is generally equally divided over the entire universe, coronium is a very rare substance. Even in outer space there are few traces of it. But a spectroscopic examination of that light from Star Melaris-A shows its presence!"

"So what?" Gage interrupted skeptically.

"But don't you see? It means that that shell came from that star. Or rather from one of several dark planets which must be moving in an orbit around Melaris-A, part of another system."

"I still don't see—"

"Let me put it this way. The inhabitants of that planet evidently are faced with cosmic disintegration, which is gradually destroying their atmosphere. They want to make a complete exodus to another planet, and Earth is perhaps one of several likely for their needs and conditions. They realize, however, that the population of Earth is already large and would be in conflict with them—"

"So they send out that shell filled with seeds, which they hope will kill off the population of Earth—"

Calthay nodded. "Exactly. But conditions here were not precisely as they had expected, and the seeds did not have quite the necessary potency. It

remained for man, in his lust for world power, to develop the seeds and strive for that same purpose. We must stop those weeds!"

"But how?" broke in Gage. "We're back at the same question."

"And I have the answer to that question. The center core of the space shell was formed of coronium. It was used because it has a negative effect on the weeds, preventing possible germination. In coronium, therefore, lies our weapon. I'll get in touch with Washington at once!"

Prior to 1972 the world's entire supply of coronium gas was limited to the volcano of Despliazso, in Italy. In 1972 coronium pockets were found at Cotopaxi, Mexico, and in central Colorado. Immediately upon Calthay's secret report to the Secretary of Agriculture, all sources of this gas were tapped. Special stratosphere transports were dispatched to convey natural coronium to a headquarters set up at San Diego.

On March 15th the fears of the world crystallized in a general all-wave radio warning, broadcast from Danzig, new capital of the Middle European Empire. The voice of August Strausvig, dictator, declared:

"The weed plague is a product of Middle European scientists. Only a minute quantity of the seeds at our disposal has been used. But they will be used to destroy entire foreign civilizations unless mass acknowledgment of the authority of our government is made. We have developed the weeds so that their potency will continue as long as we see fit. We give the world one month to decide. One month! Strausvig has spoken!"

Preparations during that month progressed with war-time rapidity. Coronium warehouses were established in New York, in Chicago, Minneapolis, New Orleans, Denver. Experimental bombardments of lower California weed fields had been entirely successful.

The listed stock of a manufacturer of spray guns sky-rocketed thirty points as the company, through mass advertising, disposed of thousands of its products. Fake weed-destroying compounds and plague preventives appeared on the market in great variety.

On both coasts and on the Mexican and Canadian borders, anti-aircraft guns were set up at intervals of every few miles. The United States was arming in the strangest way it had every known.

Then days of anxious waiting, confusing reports. Strausvig had disappeared! Strausvig was dead! The dictator would strike tomorrow!

Professor Calthay watched the developments with grim eyes.

"Isn't it ironic," he said to Gage, "that the people fear one man on the other side of the earth? But the trouble has its inception millions of miles out

in space. And yet one menace is interdependent with the other, with civilization at stake."

April 15th, dawned a gray day at the Peterson farm, with low-lying clouds and a threat of coming rain. Foreboding hung in the sky. The very air seemed charged with menace.

Calthay and Gage sat on the farmhouse veranda, gazing out at the fields. The east field was barren now, the original space-shell weeds having been destroyed with coronium. Although, as the professor had remarked, the precaution was unnecessary, since these weeds were of an entirely different type from those developed by the Strausvig scientists.

Professor Calthay had just lit his pipe, and Gage was idly turning the pages of a magazine when the sound came. Not the sound of weeds. But the low drone of airplane motors high up in the sky above the cloud level. Steadily it grew nearer, louder.

"Something funny about that," Gage said. "It's coming down, and there's no ship scheduled here at this time of day."

He turned and ran into the house, to reappear a moment later with a pair of binoculars. Followed by Calthay, he moved out into the yard. And then the plane broke through the clouds.

Gage, focusing the glasses, gave a yell of surprise. "It's radio-controlled!" he cried. "See the helix-antenna? There's no one aboard!"

Straight as a bullet the plane shot toward the ground. And now the two scientists could detect the markings on the wings: the circle-surrounded triangle of Strausvig's Empire. At an altitude of fifteen hundred feet the plane abruptly banked and began to circle.

Then a trap opened in the bottom of the fuselage, and something plummeted downward like a falling stone.

"It's a seed bomb!" Calthay cried. "Get the coronium!"

But an instant later the two men stood stunned. The seed bomb had burst, and already before their eyes weeds were taking growth. Even as they watched the ground seemed to quiver, erupting greenish stalks which shot up, matured to full growth and multiplied with terrific rapidity. In a matter of seconds the field was an expanding sea of green, and a dull roar mounted into the air as the weeds swept forward on four fronts.

"Come on!" Calthay cried. "We've got to get the coronium. If a wind springs up and hits those weeds, the plague will start again. We'll all be madmen!"

They turned and rushed toward the barn. There they met Peterson and

Field, his hired man. Feverishly they began the task of loading the metal coronium tanks into the rear of the Peterson truck. But Gage, after the last tank had been put in place, suddenly turned, a queer glitter in his eyes, and ran in long strides back to the house.

The truck rumbled out onto the field, Calthay and Peterson working like mad to fasten long nozzles with tube-metal hoses to the coronium containers. When they reached the field they stopped for a moment, appalled. As far as the eye could reach, the farm was a great sea of weeds. An ever-growing ocean of green, sweeping outward.

Calthay's heart sank. They could never stop the enveloping advance with the little coronium they had. Indeed, even as Calthay looked, he doubted whether the coronium would have any effect at all on this new variety of weeds. All the preparations of the last month seemed in vain.

"Field!" he yelled. "Rush back to the house, get Fort Snelling on the telephone and tell them what's happening. Tell them to bring every available tank of coronium gas there is in the district. Tell them to radio Washington. Call the governor. When the wind starts, the plague will sweep across the country like a thousand Black Deaths!"

Even as he spoke the wind came. As if to a magic touch the field of weeds swayed and gave forth a high singing chord. Like a huge chorus of contraltos the vibrations arose, louder and louder. And with that sound Calthay felt the madness, like a bulbous entity alive, beginning to eat into his brain.

Field and Peterson had fallen to the ground and were clawing at their hair, screaming insanely. The wind increased.

And then the scientist heard a dull rumble. He saw his assistant, Lawson Gage, rushing forward propelling a two-wheel cart, laden with machinery, even as the plane circled again to drop another seed bomb. Above it, resting on a wooden superstructure, was a large waferlike object, yellowish brown in color, with a network of wires.

Through bloodshot eyes the professor saw that Gage's face exhibited no signs of madness. His eyes were gleaming with anticipation; he wore over his ears a head-set of strange, oversize earphones.

With a quick movement Gage halted the cart and brought out three more pairs of earphones. He snapped one over the head of Calthay, bent down and repeated the process with Peterson and Field.

To his amazement, Calthay found the madness in his brain had subsided.

"It's my own idea of a method to stop the plague," Gage said. "I've been

working on it while you were at Flagstaff, but I said nothing because I haven't had a chance to try it out as yet.

"Those earphones will permit you to hear me because I'm talking to you through a microphone. They also neutralize the sound energy of the weeds at the same time."

"But how—" Calthay demanded. "How? The government has been experimenting for weeks on something like this, but failed. What's that thing up there? It looks like a gigantic seed."

"That's exactly what it is," Gage replied. "It contains thousands of partially germinated weed seeds held together in a collodion paste. All growth, as anyone who believes in the mechanist theory knows, is a form of energy. I discovered that the energy of the space-shell weeds is a negative energy. I'm fighting it with a development of Goldstein's 'Canalstrahlen' and the Thomson 'Positive Ray'.

"By ionization of gas at a low pressure in a strong electric field, I can detach the negative electrons from the atoms, recapture those electrons by colliding them with charged particles and produce a neutral ray. That's what I'm doing inside that huge seed.

"The neutral ray," he continued, "is adaptable to almost any form of transmission. A small part of it deflected along a high-frequency electric current into your earphones. That neutralizes the madness striking your brain. Since light and sound are both vibrations—as is energy itself, in fact—I had no difficulty shunting the remainder into the vibratory field. In other words, I'm fighting the weeds through their own sound!"

Gage turned a dial and pulled a switch. A low drone rose up into the air. He pulled a second switch. The droning mounted slowly. Even with earphones on, Calthay could hear it.

And something was happening to the field of weeds! Writhing as in agony, the top blooms were slowly turning black.

The wind became a driving gale. Mounting in magnitude, the horrible wailing chord rose higher. Again Calthay could feel the madness eating at his brain. The earphones seemed powerless to prevent it. He saw Peterson rock backward and utter a scream. He saw Gage's face go white, his teeth bite deep into his lips.

And then, with shaking hands, the assistant turned his control as far as it would go.

An arc of purplish flame hovered above the machinery-laden cart. The singing chord died away, and before them the weeds seemed slowly to dissolve

into nothingness. A hush fell over the farm. A moment later, where the green stalks had been was only bleak desolation . . .

"It's all over," Professor John Calthay said that night on the veranda of the Peterson house. "With Gage's machine and others which will be built like it, we can prevent the weed growth in any part of the country. The attempt of Melaris-A to annihilate the civilization of the Earth has been defeated. Strausvig and his Middle Europe can be fought on common grounds. The 'War of the Weeds' is at an end.

"And it's all through your efforts," the scientist went on, turning toward his assistant. "Once again, Gage, you have won over me in conquering a problem. What have you to say, my young friend?"

Lawson Gage smiled. "Pour me another highball," he said. "And don't hold the horses on the Scotch." . . .

KINCAID'S CAR

The boxcar which arrived in Bayou City via the Southbound 6:25 that July morning was an oddity. According to the manifest, it contained one hundred wish suppliers—station agent Jeb Collins checked this twice to make sure his bifocals were not playing him tricks—and was consigned to the Standard Chair Factory.

There was no Standard Chair Factory in Bayou City. Twenty years ago the old Latham place had housed for a brief time such a concern. But the company had gone out of business and the house had been abandoned for as long as the station agent could remember.

Collins, however, was not an imaginative man. If the manifest said "chair factory," his not to reason why. He watched the brakeman oil the rusted switch and a moment later saw the car creak slowly down the weed overgrown spur.

The 6:25 had another observer that morning. Up on Grover's Hill, a half mile south of town, Durgan Kincaid looked through field glasses out across the valley. He was a thin, erect man, with copper-colored hair, and at that hour he had finished milking and had a few moments before starting the rest of his chores. There he could quietly contemplate the vista across the river, of which he never tired. Today, while the approaching train was still a smear of smoke on the horizon, he gazed at the farther shore, the trees all grey and misty in the early light.

Then the train pulled into the station, and he saw the car.

He lowered the binoculars and wiped the lenses with his handkerchief.

At first he thought he had seen an ordinary boxcar. Then, as if viewed through water, it seemed to blur, become silver in color and elongate like a

bullet. He thought he saw a bluish aura, like foxfire, hover over it, moving slowly from stem to stern.

Kincaid cased the glasses. Half an hour later he had driven his vintage station wagon to the depot and confronted station agent Collins.

"Circus come to town, Jeb?"

The station agent looked mildly irritated. "Not that I know of."

"What became of that silver car?"

Collins applied a match to his pipe. "I don't know nothin' about a silver car. If you mean the one that come in on the 6:25, it was sided on the old spur."

"The Latham place!" exclaimed Kincaid. "What's it doing there?"

But the station agent shrugged and limped off down the platform. Kincaid stood in puzzled silence, then turned and strode down the abandoned spur. Presently he came upon the car, stopped short and viewed it with disappointment.

It wasn't silver at all, but faded red, with rusty trucks and iron work, a commonplace, swaybacked boxcar. Standing there before the boarded-up windows of the Latham house, it looked strangely lonely and forlorn.

Kincaid approached it slowly. The seal on one of the doors was broken and the door stood slightly open. It wasn't like Collins to overlook such a discrepancy. He moved to the open door, hesitated and then climbed in.

It took a moment for his eyes to accustom themselves to the half light.

The car was divided into two parts. On the right, piled almost ceiling high, were rows of cartons, each bearing the stenciled legends, FRAGILE, THIS SIDE UP, DO NOT CRUSH.

On the left of the door a six foot square section had been arranged to resemble the corner of a room. An old-fashioned room. Quaint, homelike.

A white flounced curtain draped from a high painted likeness of a window. An oval braided rug covered the floor. Drawn up before a pot-bellied stove was a spindle rocking chair. On the table stood a Rochester lamp and beside it a wicker sewing basket with several black stockings peeping out. A Currier & Ives print hung upon the wall.

But apart from the utter incongruity of its presence here, there was something magic about the room likeness. It carried Kincaid back to his boyhood and his holiday visits to his grandmother's house. He could almost see the Connecticut snow blowing past the window, hear the wood crackling in the stove, see his grandmother rocking slowly to and fro.

He turned and looked at the stacked cartons. One lay at his feet where it

had fallen after breaking loose from the steel restraining tape. The box was open and its contents spilled out.

Revealed there in miniature was a duplicate of the old-fashioned room beside him. In amazingly perfect detail he saw a tiny replica of the flounced curtain, the spindle rocking chair, braided rug and Rochester lamp.

Kincaid left the car and headed thoughtfully down the track. He had gone only a few yards when he saw a woman coming toward him. Dressed entirely in lavender with an oversized hat, she might have stepped out of a Godey's print. Her skirts all but swept the ground and her fringed parasol belonged to another age.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "Do you live here?"

"No, I don't," Kincaid replied.

The woman nodded toward the vacant house. "Then can you tell me who handles the leasing of this property? That is, if it's available for rent."

"It's been empty for a long time." Kincaid said somewhat uncertainly. "I believe the South Shore Agency has the listing."

She nodded. "And where will I find the South Shore Agency?"

"On River Street. You can't miss it, Miss . . . ?"

"Lavinia Parker. I'm new to Bayou City."

There was something mildly disturbing about the woman. Something alien in the way she twisted her head jerkily and peered at him with fixed lashless eyes.

"Can I drive you into town, Miss Parker?" Kincaid said. "My car is down by the depot."

"Thank you, no." She shook her head. "This house attracts me. I think I'll look about a while."

Driving back to his farm, Kincaid found himself smiling at the woman's out-dated costume and her interest in the tumble-down mansion. Then his face sobered as his thoughts returned to the boxcar and its strange contents.

On Wednesday morning Miss Lavinia Parker appeared at the office of the South Shore Real Estate Agency. That afternoon three repair men began a hasty refurbishing job on the old Latham mansion. They patched the roof, put new panes in broken windows, straightened the lintels on jammed doors. And on Friday Miss Parker moved in.

Meanwhile, agent Collins had notified the railroad that the Standard Chair Factory, the consignee of car No. 165943, Seal MS 2960, was no longer in existence. That report, plus an irregularity in the car's serial number, resulted in the matter being turned over to Railroad Police.

In due course, Lieutenant Dane Woodrow was dispatched to Bayou City. He was a heavy set, ruddy man who smoked too many cigars and was completely devoted to detail. After conferring briefly with Collins, he set off down the spur to the boxcar.

The first thing he saw was Miss Lavinia Parker sitting on the Latham veranda, busy with her knitting. Then he saw something else. In the open doorway of the boxcar Durgan Kincaid appeared, a camera under his arm.

"Here, you!" Woodrow cried. "Don't you know you can be arrested for breaking into railroad property?"

Kincaid shrugged. "The door was open," he said. "I haven't taken anything except a few pictures."

With an agility unusual for a man of his bulk, Woodrow vaulted into the car. A moment later he was back at the door, glaring down at Kincaid.

"Have you been living in this car?" he demanded.

"Certainly not," Kincaid said.

"Then what's this furnished room doing here?"

Kincaid shook his head. "I don't know."

Woodrow ducked back into the car again. When he reappeared at the door he looked bewildered.

"I'm damned!" he said slowly.

On the veranda Miss Lavinia Parker put aside her knitting and strode down the steps to the two men.

"Mr. Kincaid," she said, "I think you should give some thought to the suggestion I made to you this morning. That is, since the company this merchandise was sent to is no longer in business, why not offer the officer a price for the contents of the car? Plus demurrage charges, of course."

Lieutenant Woodrow shook his head. "Sorry. The railroad doesn't operate that way. If the consignee no longer is in business, the merchandise goes back to the shipper—at the shipper's expense."

Miss Parker nodded. "I'm sure Mr. Kincaid appreciates that. But it occurred to me—to him, that is—that if there should be any mix-up over the identity of the shipper, Mr. Kincaid could put in a bid, couldn't he?"

Woodrow shrugged. "It's out of my field," he said. "But I'll speak to the freight agent."

Bayou City, steeped in midsummer boredom, awoke abruptly that July day to find itself siezed by boredom-inspired curiosity. In one bound the boxcar became the settlement's principal topic of conversation. Like crown fire word of the car raced up one side of River Street and down the other. Rumor

mounted rumor and the fact that no one seemed to know anything definite only added to the enigma.

When the story reached Sam Warton, editor of the *Bayou City Sentinel*—he would have heard of it sooner had he not chosen that particular day to go fishing—he viewed it with a newspaperman's characteristic suspicion. Not discounting its news value, however, he nosed around, asked a lot of questions and eventually drove out to see Kincaid who, gossip said, knew more about the matter than anyone else.

"Kincaid," he said, accepting gratefully the dipper of cold water from the pump, "what the devil's in that car and what's it doing by the old Latham place?"

Kincaid shrugged. "Why don't you see for yourself?" he said.

"Why? Because it's locked now, that's why, and that fool Collins refuses to open it. And, because that Parker woman—the one who dresses as if this were the year, 1910—sits on her front porch with a shotgun and threatens to shoot anyone who comes near it."

Kincaid chuckled.

"Collins says that car is supposed to contain wish suppliers," Warton continued. "What's a wish supplier?"

"I don't know."

Warton lit a cigar. "This chap who was around here the other day—Woodrow or Woodring—he's from the Railroad Police, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"What did he want?"

"I'm not sure. He asked a lot of questions."

The editor gave up in despair, but he wasn't through yet by any means. Next day he ran a three column picture of the boxcar on page one of the *Sentinel* under the caption, "Mystery Car," and had the satisfaction of having the story picked up by one of the press associations with a request for "more."

As for Kincaid, he forgot about the matter until he received that odd letter from the assistant freight agent of the railroad company.

This is to inform you that this office has taken under advisement your bid of one hundred dollars for merchandise in car No. 165943, now sided at Bayou City. As there are no claims outstanding and as both shipper and consignee remain unidentifiable, this bid has been accepted, and you are hereby authorized to remove the merchandise immediately.

Kincaid read the letter again and frowned. Somehow it didn't ring true. Since when did a railroad company, always a stickler for red tape, accept an unwritten bid that hadn't gone through the regular channels?

He brooded over the matter. He didn't want any of the silly doll houses that were loaded in the car and neither, he felt sure, would anyone else. Moreover he certainly wasn't going to pay a hundred dollars for them simply because of the whim of some senile woman.

Next day, however, he drove to the car—it wasn't locked as Warton had said. The broken seal had been fixed so that casual inspection made it look intact. He entered and stood looking at the cartons. And there in the hot silence of the car he felt his determination slip away and an overwhelming obsession sweep over him. As in a dream he began to carry the cartons out and stack them in neat rows on the Latham house veranda.

Miss Parker viewed his work with silent approval. When the task was completed she scribbled a few words on a sheet of paper and handed it to him. "Take this over to the *Sentinel* office," she said.

"What is it?"

"Notice of an auction. We're going to hold a public sale to dispose of those cartons."

"But we can't sell merchandise we haven't paid for. We can't . . ."

Miss Parker smiled benignly. "Never you mind. I'll take care of the details."

Two mornings later a crowd of several hundred persons gathered before the Latham house. The temperature was 97, the humidity high and handkerchiefs appeared frequently, mopping perspiring brows. Kincaid watched Lavinia Parker take a position on the veranda steps.

The woman did not begin to speak at once. She drew a lorgnette from her pocket, raised it to her eyes and surveyed the assemblage before her. She moved the glass slowly from left to right, lingering momentarily as it focused on individuals and groups and causing noticeable unease as each person felt himself the object of her inspection.

For the lorgnette was unlike any they had ever seen. Between the two lenses a small prism caught and radiated the sunlight; and circling about the prism, seemingly without support, a series of tiny globes looked like transparent marbles.

Later, when the sale was over and the last of the crowd had gone, Kincaid looked at the money on the veranda table with disbelief.

"They didn't even ask that the cartons be opened . . . to see if their contents

were damaged or not," he said. "They bought them as if they were hypnotized."

Miss Parker smiled. "Maybe they were. Sometimes people are so curious they want something without knowing what it is." She bent down and lifted a carton to the table. "I saved one for you, Durgan. Take it along home."

If the citizens of Bayou City thought themselves cheated with their strange purchases, they made no complaints. Neither did they discuss them openly. It was as if some strange tabu cloaked the subject. True, the *Sentinel* carried a sly dig at two town bachelors who had bought doll houses. And the press association which had used the original story of the boxcar created a mild sensation when it interviewed a professor of psychology at the state university on the subject. But in newspaper parlance this was the "silly season," and the story died a natural death.

It was some time before Kincaid opened the carton he had brought home from the auction sale. To his surprise, he found it did not contain a doll house but an object vaguely reminiscent of Miss Parker's lorgnette. There were two tubes between which a prism was encircled by a row of tiny globes. From the under side, two appendages hung down; they looked like roots of a plant but they were formed of a strange metal that was hard to the touch, yet soft and pliable.

A card wired to one corner bore the words: *Negative Receiver. Keep in an open space.*

After a moment's thought, Kincaid picked the thing up and carried it outside. He walked across the furrowed fields until he was some distance from the house and threw it out before him.

He then tidied up his thoughts and turned his attention to a number of tasks he had been putting off for some time. One morning as he was heading across the yard the banging of the toolshed door caught his attention. He strode to it and stopped on the threshold.

The interior of the tool shed was filled almost wall to wall with a car he recognized instantly. Ed Hinkle's dilapidated '35 Ford.

For years Hinkle, the town druggist, had been the laughing stock of Bayou City because he persisted in driving that beat-up jalopy. But what was the car doing here?

Out in the yard again, he looked at the ground before the doorway, still moist from the heavy rain of two nights ago. Lips tight, he trailed the tracks down the slope and into the night pasture. The sprawled, motionless bodies of two of his best milch cows loomed up before him.

Kincaid's jaw set hard as he saw the skid marks where the car had struck and done its killing. Then he saw something else. *The tracks began there in mid-career as if the car had descended from the sky.*

He retraced his steps, got into the station wagon and headed down the lane. At the junction with the highway he drew up.

A shiny new convertible was barreling down the highway, motor snarling like an angry hornet. When the driver sighted Kincaid he blew a blast from his horn and slowed to a stop.

"Hi, Durgan." It was Ed Hinkle. "Got myself a new chariot."

Kincaid nodded coldly.

"Yep," Hinkle went on, "I made a good deal, and I cashed in on it."

"Funny thing," the man went on, "know that rock-covered hundred and sixty acres of mine out on the Old Timber Road? I was saying only the other day I wished I could get rid of that property and then out of a clear sky Sam Warton made me an offer. I put the money down kerplunk on this car before I could change my mind. It's got power brakes," he said proudly.

"What did you do with your old '35?" Kincaid said.

Hinkle scratched his head. "Now that's a funny thing. Feller at the agency said it was too old to trade in, so I left it in my back yard and somebody stole it."

"Then you didn't put it in my tool shed?"

It was Kinkle's turn to stare. "What are you talking about?"

"Never mind," said Kincaid slowly.

Hinkle sat in puzzled silence. "Well, I gotta go," he said. "Be seein' you."

He drove off with a screech of tires.

Next morning after coffee, curiosity prompted Kincaid to go out and look at the thing which had been labeled a "negative receiver" but which he preferred to think of as an oversized lorgnette. He was half way to that section of field before he became aware of his surroundings. Then an exclamation of wrath and astonishment burst from him.

The entire east-forty was a sea of rocks!

Rocks were everywhere . . . in piles . . . in cairns in scattered formless array. They stretched as far as the road on the right, to the pine copse on the left. What had once been one of the finest farming tracts in the state now resembled a spread-out quarry.

He stood there, mouth open, a man stunned. Who could have done such a thing? And in the name of all that was eternal . . . why?

Half an hour later, he drove down River Street in defiance of speed laws.

Abreast of the hardware store, he jammed on the brakes, thrust open the car door and yelled, "Get in!" Miss Parker climbed in the car.

"What's wrong, Durgan? You look upset."

His hands tightened on the wheel. "I don't know what's going on around here," he said savagely, "but somebody's going to pay . . ."

"Pay for what?"

"For my land. It's full of rocks."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

He told her what happened. Miss Parker patted his hand reassuringly. "Now, Durgan," she said, "You stop fretting. I'm sure everything will turn out all right."

A muscle on Kincaid's cheek began to pulsate. "Ever since that boxcar arrived here I've felt something strange hanging over this town.

"Another thing," he continued, "that carton I took home contained something called a negative receiver."

A gleam entered the woman's eyes.

"It's made of some funny kind of metal and . . . it's growing . . . !"

Kincaid was not by nature an apprehensive man. Yet the chain of events which now began and cataclysmically reached a climax in Bayou City left him badly shaken.

Quite suddenly the town changed into a place of mystery and confusion.

Without warning everybody, it seemed, had his innermost wish gratified. New cars, driven by smugly content townsfolk, appeared on the streets. Trucks moved back and forth, delivering new washing machines, television sets and refrigerators. Houses had fresh coats of paint. Garages were built, porches enclosed and the Bayou City Clothing Store did a rush business.

The queer part of it was that all of these transactions were part of an endless chain. A man suddenly learned that his stock holdings in a light and power utility had tripled its value. He sold and with the money contracted to have a new front erected on his variety store, a dream which had been his for a long time. The two contractors profited nicely from this job, and each bought a new car. The double purchase boosted the car salesman's record over the top in the annual sales contest . . .

And so it went. Wishes . . . dreams . . . suddenly brought into realization, spreading through Bayou City's populace like a ripple in a pool of water.

Questioned, Sam Warton, editor of the *Sentinel*, said vaguely that he always had had an eye on Ed Hinkle's Timber Road property but never knew how to get rid of the rocks. On the other hand, Tom Owens who farmed the land to

the east, the other side of the ridge, said that while there were no rocks on his property, there was a lake smack-dab in the center of it. "I've wished a hundred times there was a way to drain that lake," he said.

Back home, Kincaid went over the day's events with a sense of desperation. He had the feeling he had become enmeshed in a web which was slowly tightening about him and from which there was no escape. He went to bed and fell into a restless slumber.

Some time after midnight he awoke with a low pitched, muffled sound in his ears. As he lay there it steadily grew louder.

He slid out of bed, got into his trousers and shoes and went out into the star-softened darkness. He headed for Clover Creek, a normally placid stream that meandered through his property. Then he was on the creek bank, facing a stream gone mad, rushing past him in the darkness.

The truth filtered into him slowly. Owens' Lake! In some impossible way it had found a channel through the ridge.

Tom Owens had had his wish!

As had Sam Warton . . . As had Ed Hinkle . . . !

He knew what it meant. The lake, seeking its own level, would inundate his farm. His house, set on low ground, would be the first to go.

He stood there, the muddy water whirling up over his ankles, the smell of wet earth thick and heavy in his nostrils. Then he turned and ran stiff-legged toward the house.

Water was already swirling across the lane as he headed the station wagon toward the highway.

And now he saw an incredible sight. There were things in the fields on either side of the lane which no sane person would expect to see on farmland . . . discarded things that were old. He looked upon scratched and worn television sets, rusty, paint-faded cars, piles of outmoded appliances. He saw stacks of old lumber, studded with rusty nails, weatherbeaten store signs and hand-push lawn mowers. All there in the glare of his headlights, partially covered with brown, silt-heavy water that was rising with fantastic speed. His farm had been turned into one vast junk yard.

Fifteen minutes later, he was driving past the silent stores of Bayou City. He turned left and drew up before the Latham place. The house was in darkness. He got a flashlight out of the glove compartment and, after a moment's thought, a heavy iron bar from the floor of the station wagon. Then, switching out the lights, he moved toward the boxcar which still stood on the weed-grown spur.

He climbed in and played the beam of the flashlight before him. In the far corner was the familiar furnished room.

He walked over to it, idly lifted the sewing basket from the table. When he put it down again he was conscious of its clicking into position like the piece of a puzzle moving into its proper slot.

Far back in a corner of his brain the suggestion of an idea began to grow.

When this boxcar had first arrived in Bayou City, there had been three different items in the car: the large room, the miniature rooms packed in cartons, and the negative receiver.

Suppose, he told himself, the miniature rooms were exactly what they were listed as on the railroad manifest—wish suppliers. In some incredible way they gave their owners the gratifications of their desires. Kincaid chewed his upper lip. He was stretching the thin cord of logic. Anyway, why a room?

A room was a symbol, wasn't it, representing one of the basic elements of our culture—the living quarters of the family. What better device in which to incorporate something which would affect the very foundations of that culture?

Kincaid moved across to the Currier & Ives print that hung upon one wall of the furnished room. Like the other objects, it brought a host of memories rushing to him.

Suppose the entire chain of events were part of a plan in which this town had been selected as a focal point. And assume for the purpose of argument that an alien intelligence—there, he had said it!—had chosen what it considered routine details to accomplish its end.

And what was that end? His pulse quickened as his hands lifted the Rochester lamp and then returned it to the table. Again he was conscious of the object's clicking into position like the final piece in a picture puzzle.

Grant a cross section of human society the attainment of its wants without the benefit of labor and you had—luxury spoon fed . . . magnified a thousand times. That, in essence, was what had happened to Bayou City, and it was not a pleasant happening. The town had become a smug town. With the realization of its wishes, complacency and self-satisfaction were the order of the day.

And if somehow the wish suppliers gave their owners the material things of our culture and those objects came from outside our Universe, then the objects which they replaced would by physical law have to be removed.

That's where the negative receiver fitted in. It had made of his farm a vast receptacle for all things which the simple act of wishing had replaced. Gath-

ered them in one place preparatory to their obliteration, he supposed. Kincaid's head began to ache.

He bent down and opened and closed the sewing basket on the table. As he did, he was vaguely aware that the air above the table staggered slightly. And for one fleeting second he had the impression he was standing before a surrealist panel faced by an array of fantastic dials and gauges.

It came to him then with sudden insight. The life-sized furnished room was the master control, the operation-console from which the plan was directed. The quaint, old-fashioned trappings were only a mask.

In his mind's eye, he saw a woman dressed in lavender seated before that panel while her hands played with the switches and dials.

And, as he considered, why shouldn't an alien look like a lady of quality of 1900? In crossing the vast gulf of space-time that must separate her from her own culture, wasn't an oversight of a few decades to be taken as a matter of course?

He remembered other discrepancies: The letter from the railroad company; the listing of the wish suppliers as such on the manifest; the mix-up over the boxcar's serial and seal numbers; and the selection of a concern which had been out of business twenty years as consignee.

All rough edges in the plan. *But what was incredible was that the plan had been carried out at all, that the discrepancies had been so few and so minor.*

A voice cut through the silence of the boxcar. "What are you doing here, Mr. Kincaid?"

He swung the flash. Lavinia Parker stood there, just inside the door of the car. In one hand she held her lorgnette.

He said, "I told you I don't like what's happening to this town."

She smiled a hard smile. "Are you quite sure the townspeople will thank you for interfering with their lives? They seem quite satisfied with conditions as they are."

"But don't you see," Kincaid said, "you've spoiled the very concept our culture is based on—that a man must earn the things he wants, to appreciate them."

The woman continued as if she hadn't heard the interruption. "You fail to understand. I may as well tell you now that this insignificant planet was being considered for one of the greatest sociological and cultural honors known to intelligent life—a place in the Galactic Federation. As a member you would have found yourself rich beyond your loftiest dreams in opportunity afforded by contact with cultures eons older than yours. Some of us objected on the

grounds that you had not yet reached a high enough point in the Mokart civilization scale. But others thought different. They examined your art and your music and your literature, and they assumed you had advanced farther than you had. So they sent me here to make a test . . . and you failed . . .”

“What do you mean?” Kincaid said.

“I mean that when the citizens of this community were granted the fulfillment of their wishes—a basic checkpoint of the test—they gave no thought to the advancement of their society or enrichment of their culture but reacted to elemental desires. They wanted things material. They showed themselves to be an immature race close to the primordial slime from which they evolved.

“Of course this is but a segment of your civilization, but what happened here would happen other places; it is a representative cross section.

“Now, Mr. Kincaid, I suggest you leave this car . . . immediately!”

But Kincaid didn’t leave. He turned to the life-sized room at his side, reached out and seized the wicker sewing basket. Moving with an instinctive sense of direction he twisted it in its invisible slot until the air directly above staggered again and a hum sounded as if hidden machinery somewhere were put into operation.

Eyes glittering, Lavinia Parker leveled her lorgnette. From the twin tubes a mother-of-pearl radiance fanned outward to bathe Kincaid in its glow.

Even as the malignant mist thickened about him, Kincaid saw the Rochester lamp on the table transform itself into an elliptic shaped dial and a strangely calibrated gauge above it. He raised the iron bar still gripped in his hand and brought it smashing down upon them.

There was a slight implosion like an electric light bulb breaking. Then the shock wave came. The furnished room disintegrated before his eyes and Kincaid felt himself flung forward and bludgeoned against the car wall. The last thing he saw before blackness closed down on him was the woman in lavender stretched motionless on the floor, the broken lorgnette beside her.

But it was a woman in costume only. The face and form—were those of a creature—indescribably alien!

On August 2nd Durgan Kincaid was released from the hospital. He returned to his farm and the newly formed lake there, but he made no mention of Lavinia Parker who was never seen again in Bayou City.

Nor did he speak of the boxcar which also vanished completely.

Curiously, only a brief mention of the boxcar appeared in the *Sentinel*. It quoted the night operator at Thatcher's Bend, the next station north, who insisted he had seen a boxcar running wild down main line trackage.

"It went past me like a bat out of Hell," he said. "It was all silver and shaped like a bullet."

The operator was suspended for drunkenness and turning in false reports. "And rightly so," the *Sentinel* said editorially.

THE RANDOM QUANTITY

Fielding and I worked it out afterward, and we came to the conclusion that the entire Bedford Hall affair was the result of a Mowbilay print, the tilt of the laboratory floor, and a stray shot from the pistol range in the armory. At least, that is what we wanted to believe. The actual facts were something else again.

It was the fourth of March when the affair first began. I remember the date because it marked the third anniversary of my instructorship at Merivale College. The day was unusually warm for so early in the year, and my class in Physics 1. Lab. (no prerequisite) was not paying all the attention it should have. There were, however, a minimum number of absentees, and those students I had called on to recite had done so with replies that showed a creditable amount of home preparation.

"The next problem is the one having to do with inertia," I said. "You may explain it, please, Mr. . . . Ah, I don't believe I have your name. You sir, in the third seat, back row."

He was a tall, well-built youth with dark hair and dark eyes, and unmistakably handsome features. Although his clothes were entirely modern and his hair clipped short, there was something indefinably old-fashioned about him. I noticed this as he outlined the problem in clear and concise statements and gave its correct answer. When the class was over, I asked him to wait a moment.

"I don't believe I've seen you before," I said then. "Have you registered recently?"

He replied that he had entered school in the spring term and that his name was Jules Renard. And then as I started to enter his name on my records, he

asked a question. Was a freshman ever permitted to do experimental work of his own in the school laboratories?

I looked at him with new interest. "I admire your ambition, Renard; but don't you think your regular scholastic work will keep you occupied for the present?"

"Yes, I suppose so," he admitted. "But you see, while I intend of course to keep up my studies, I'm more interested in other angles of experiment."

"What other angles?"

He took a cigarette out of his pocket but did not light it. "That's hard to explain, Professor Denby. If I said the random quantity, the matter of chance, it wouldn't mean much, would it?"

"I'm afraid it wouldn't," I smiled.

"But you will say a good word in my behalf at some time in the near future, won't you?" he persisted.

To this general request I casually assented, never dreaming to what lengths it would lead. Promptly after that I forgot Renard until mid-term examinations. When I checked over his paper, written boldly in a large flowing hand, I began to look upon this student with new regard. He had scored 98.2 on the test, which considering the amount of memory work it entailed, showed definite brilliance. But it was the manner in which he answered the questions that interested me. In the objective part of the test his answers were clear and concise. In the subjective part he seemed to enter each problem blindly as if he were on uncertain ground. For several sentences he apparently groped his way, using terminology that was strange to him. Then abruptly his meandering ceased, and he came to the point with a rush. When I mentioned this fact, he looked at me a little queerly.

"It's the random quantity I'm interested in, sir."

I gave him permission to use a small storeroom opening off the laboratory for his experiments. Professor Fielding of the Psychology Department advised this move after I had told him about the boy. Fielding was writing a new textbook and was on the lookout for any subjects among the student body.

But in those early spring months at Merivale College, Jules Renard definitely was not a problem child. In all respects he was a normal under-classman. He went to the sunlight dances. He smoked too many cigarettes, and he had a habit of wearing loud hand-painted neckties. He did, however, spend a great deal of time in the little laboratory storeroom. Several times, long after school hours, I interrupted him there at his work. He always seemed a trifle embarrassed, but answered me politely as he tinkered with his tools.

He was building some sort of a wheel. The thing was mounted on a spindle so that it would revolve and consisted of a concave surface about two feet in diameter. There was a little oblong box mounted on the table beside it, coverless and containing a few cogs, odds and ends of wire, and a couple of Micro-Wellman tubes. As I stood there, watching him, he would spin the wheel and then watch a little dial on the side of the box. Several curious books lay on the table, which at the time I thought odd he should be reading: Richard Verstegan's *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*, Bentley's *Beyond the Mundane*, and a little red morocco-bound volume entitled *Twenty Experiments in the Occult*.

The spring term ended, and the campus depleted itself to the emptiness of the summer quarter. Renard had no summer classes, but he continued to haunt the laboratory. At length one night in July I came upon him there at an even later hour than usual. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was begrimed, but he sprang up and grinned broadly when I entered.

"Well, have you finished it yet?" I asked him.

He looked puzzled. "Finished? What do you mean, sir?"

"The wheel. You've been working on it for months now. What the devil is it?"

He lighted a cigarette and shrugged. "I don't know," he said.

"You don't know?"

He sat down in a chair and faced me. "No, I don't know," he said, speaking very quietly. "Does that sound queer? It isn't meant to be. You see, I told you before I was interested in the random quantity. I might add to that, the random quantity tempered by the occult." He inhaled a lungful of smoke. "I'm working on the postulation that the subconscious brain can behave just as—shall I say deliberately?—as the conscious, especially when influenced by some power from without. I believe in other words that there is no such thing as a haphazard action."

I eyed him a bit coldly. "Perhaps you'd better explain."

"Take this wheel." He waved his cigarette toward it. "It has been constructed with no set outline, plan or rule. Yet you see it as a many-segmented unit with definite signs of accomplishment. It has grown as it has seen fit to grow . . ."

"Just one moment," I said. "Are you trying to tell me you've just been adding wires and gadgets wherever the spirit prompted you?"

He shrugged, got up and crossed to the window. "I was afraid you wouldn't understand," he said.

Looking back, I must emphasize that aside from his "wheel" and his conversation of that night, Renard continued to act the normal student. He had interested himself in the hobby of gathering old prints, and without any permission, began to tack copies on the laboratory storeroom walls. There were several garish Albitons and even a Godey or two. There were a number of Currier and Ives that I had never seen before. But the one which aroused my interest was a large two-by-three foot Mowbilay framed in gold leaf, now heavily tarnished. Renard had undoubtedly found it in some second-hand shop.

It was a typical Mowbilay, stiff, ornate, and horribly lacking in artistic quality, and with exaggerated attention to the minutest detail. The scene pictured the interior of a gambling casino. In the center was the roulette table, with the wheel in the middle, a croupier at each end and an official on a high chair behind each croupier. Gathered about the table were a group of men and women in dress of a bygone age.

In the center of this group one blonde woman dressed in white was in the act of turning from the roulette wheel. Her hand held a small derringer pistol which she leveled at the croupier in the foreground. A curl of smoke was issuing from the derringer barrel, and the croupier was slumped across the table.

At the bottom of this dramatic scene was the simple caption: "*Messieurs, faites votre Jeu!*"

Renard saw me studying this print and nodded. "They paid a lot of attention to detail in those days, didn't they?" he said. "Look, you can even see where the ivory ball stopped on the roulette wheel, on the twelve, and the woman—judging by her left hand—has placed her money on impair eleven. There's a story behind that print all right."

I couldn't help but stare at the woman in white. Crude, the picture might be, yet the expression of hatred in her eyes was startling. Long after I had returned to my room that night the memory of her remained with me. And all throughout the following day as I gave my lectures and held my recitations I thought about her. There was something about the woman in that print that seemed to draw me to her and yet at the same time warned me away. I went into the storeroom, turned on the ceiling lights and examined the picture with great care. For a moment I thought the roulette wheel ball had stopped on the thirteen, whereas I was positive that on the night before Renard had called my attention to its being on twelve. And then when I looked again I saw with relief that I was mistaken. It *was* the twelve.

One of Renard's books lay open on the table, the volume, *Twenty Experiments in the Occult*, and to an academic man it appeared to be the worst sort of balderdash. All the superstitions and ignorance of the ages seemed to be incorporated in it. And yet as I riffled its pages and read a passage here and there, I was forced to admit the writing was done in a scholarly and restrained manner. Under the chapter heading, *Numerals*, several paragraphs caught my eye:

While numerology with its simple tabulation of the vowels and consonants in a person's name is of little consequence to these pages, there is no doubt that the use of numbers has a definite psychic value when skillfully applied. Eric Zeldt, Vienna, 1911, has recorded the numeral 6 appearing a number of times in connection with the mysterious disappearance of Ludwig Blueker, diamond merchant, who in his sixty-sixth year purchased steamship ticket 66D for stateroom 6b on the *Hellendoorn*, leaving Rotterdam on the sixth day of the sixth month. And again:

It is obvious, of course, that most experiments with numerals have failed because they were based on the laws of chance. A man draws a 3 from a deck of cards. He shuffles and repeats, drawing 6, 5, and 9 in succession. The chances of his drawing four 3's would be thousands to one against him. And yet who is to say that that thousandth chance could not be controlled to repeat itself time and time again.

I smiled at this, but I sobered when I read the next passage:

In 1846 Spachinni (first name not known), living in Altamura, designed a wheel constructed of cypress wood with a hollow core in which he placed a bit of camphor and a drop of quicksilver. By arranging numbers in triads and doubling the first digit every turn of the wheel he attempted to produce a system which would explain the random quantity.

Deep in thought, I closed the book and left the room. What sort of dual personality was this Jules Renard who could be as sane and down-to-earth as any of his fellow students one moment and a pseudo-mystic the next? As I opened the door leading to the outer corridor of Bedford Hall, I stopped a moment.

Was it imagination or had a sound come to my ears from the storeroom? A sound as of Renard's wheel spinning alone in the darkness.

For three days after that I punctuated the closing of each laboratory class with a quick trip to the storeroom and another look at the Mowbilay print. I could offer no reason as to the fascination of the woman in the print of the gambling casino. Yet fascination there was. I studied every detail of her dress, every contour of her face. With each visit the obsession grew more intense. There was something evil, something incredibly diabolic in the painted wom-

an's eyes, and that evil seemed to pervade the entire room. I scribbled the following note and left it on the table:

Sorry, but I must ask you to remove your pictures. College regulations.

On the morrow I saw that Renard had in part complied. The Currier and Ives and the Godeys were all gone, but the Mowbilay still remained. About to take it down myself, I stopped. I was giving in to a whim, and the whole thing was absurd. I returned to my desk.

Renard came in a quarter of an hour later. He passed me without speaking and hurried into the storeroom. A moment later I heard his wheel spinning. Until nine P. M. I labored over my papers then locked my desk and prepared to leave.

"Good night, Renard," I called. "Better go home early and get some sleep."

There was no reply from the storeroom. I left Bedford Hall and made my way across the campus to my rooms. But all the way down the darkened lane I moved with a picture of that woman in the print in my mind. That and a growing feeling of unease.

Undressing, I went to bed immediately. Sleep would not come. Across the room the clock ticked away the passing minutes and announced the half hours, one after another. Eleven o'clock came and passed, and still I lay there, wide awake. No matter how strenuously I tried to guide my thoughts, I could think of nothing but the woman in the print. There was something wrong with that picture. I could feel it with every fibre of my body.

I must have dozed off at length, but I was abruptly awakened by the ringing of my phone.

"Yes?" I answered drowsily. "Who is it?"

Renard's voice came over the wire, pitched in excitement.

"Can you come over here right away, sir?" he said breathlessly. "I've made an astounding discovery."

"Where are you?" Something was wrong with the connection. A grating, grinding sound muffled his voice.

"I've found it . . . the numbers' system!" Renard said. "Please hurry."

There was a click and the phone went dead. Not until then did I remember that my laboratory, like most of the rooms in Bedford Hall, was equipped with an outside telephone. I hurried into my clothes and made my way across the black campus. Anxiety accompanied me like a storm cloud.

The door to Bedford Hall was locked as it well should be at this hour. I opened it with my key, climbed the stairs to the second floor and headed down the dark corridor.

In the laboratory as I switched on the lights all was silent. The storeroom door was closed. It was also locked as I found a moment later when I tried the latch.

"Renard!" I called. "Are you there?"

There was utterly no sound from beyond that door. And then as I stood there listening, I heard it. The sound of the wheel spinning.

"Renard!"

Hollow and muffled, yet above the whirring of the wheel Renard's voice reached me: "Nine . . . sixteen . . . twenty-two . . . twelve. Six . . . thirteen . . . twenty-seven . . . *twelve*. Five . . . seventeen . . . twenty-nine . . . *twelve!*"

"Renard!" I hammered my fists on the door.

There was a silence then, and for a moment I thought he was about to let me in. Then the wheel and the voice began again: "*Two . . . four . . . nineteen . . . eight . . . TWELVE!*"

When it came, it turned me to stone. Dull and resounding, the thunder of a pistol shot fired filled the storeroom. It was followed by a sharp cry, the sound of a falling body, and—I am almost positive of this—a low, feminine laugh.

The spell broke then, I threw my shoulders against the door and burst it open. Two feet across the threshold I drew up short, staring in horror.

Jules Renard lay sprawled full length upon his work-table. There was a small bullet hole in his temple from which blood poured viscously.

He was dead, and his "wheel" lay on the floor, broken in a hundred fragments.

As I said, Fielding of the Psychology Department and I worked it out together, and the police, after much hesitation, were forced to accept what we told them: That the storeroom window was open; that the armory building and particularly the pistol range of the armory lay but a scant few yards away; that on that particular night a group of Sigma Nu boys were practising late on the range, preparing for the Intra-Mural Target Meet scheduled for the following week; that one of the students was a collector of antique firearms and in a spirit of fun was trying his weapons out for the first time: derringers, flint-locks, wheel locks, and modern automatics; that no spent bullet could be found in the room, the slug having passed through Renard's head and then, apparently, out the far window. And finally that the floor of the laboratory storeroom was almost an inch out of plumb, sufficient angle to make the wheel revolve, assuming the slightest vibration such as the closing of a door had started it.

But those facts do not explain the Mowbilay print on the wall. It is true

that I looked at this print so many times the details were somewhat confused in my mind. Yet smoke was no longer issuing from the pistol of the woman in white, whereas I was positive it had been clearly in evidence before. And the figure of the falling croupier—had he really been falling? He was standing right now.

Also—and to this I offer no explanation at all—the shattered dial of Renard's wheel had stopped on the twelve, the same number clearly visible on the roulette in the Mowbilay print.

SEQUENCE

By noon Carston had made his daily inspection circuit of the drome. He had surveyed the commissary, loitered past the new structure that was to house the courts and exchanged a few pleasantries with the sergeant of the constabulary. He had checked the oxygen and humidity gauges on the big board outside the power building. And he had climbed to the drome's Central Observation Platform within the quartz bubble, where he stood now, gazing out at the incredible landscape of Nida 255.

A jigsaw pattern of tumbled monolithic rocks in a myriad of pastel colors stretched before him as far as he could see. Off to the left where the rock formations descended into a low bluish plain, a mass of girders and steel ribs crouched like some huge spider—all that was left of the *Centauria*. As Carston looked at the dismantled space ship now, a wave of repugnance swept over him.

Ten years! Ten years he had spent in that ugly hulk while it had bored through space, crossing the incalculable distances from Earth to this planet. He had lived perhaps an eighth of his life imprisoned with two thousand others in a man-constructed projectile that was such a leviathan not even he nor his officers had completely explored its galleries, its courts, its corridors, its great hydroponic growing chambers.

But success, such as it was, could partially be claimed theirs. They had reached this new System and they had landed on Nida 255, not because conditions were ideal—they were far from that—but because the planet was on the outer fringe of the unknown. Beyond lay mystery. Here they could establish a base for deeper exploration, and here they would perhaps be sighted by the next vessel from Earth, if one ever came.

Carston prided himself that his company of two thousand had accomplished a lot since their landing five months ago. First and foremost, they had erected this huge drome over the settlement, protecting themselves against the outside rarified atmosphere and the fierce herds of two legged goat-like creatures that seemed to migrate constantly from one pole to the other. Second they had maintained their social structure without a hitch. Five marriages, one divorce, three petty crimes—all had been settled, including an election of minor officials, in as smooth a procedure as if they had been still back on Earth. Within the drome, houses had been built, streets laid out, shrubbery planted. But at a cost!

Material for the drome had been obtained by ologizing a form of igneous rock that was abundant on the planet and spinning it into a film-like composition that slowly hardened when exposed to light. The superstructure that was required to support this huge envelope, however, had to be taken from their ship, the *Centauria*. It had meant dismantling the vessel, and it had meant burning their last bridge behind them. They were marooned on Nida 255 now, for better or for worse.

A buzzer sounded abruptly and a light glowed on a small panel at Carston's side. He pushed a stud and watched the view panel illuminate with the likeness of young Stewart who was on duty at East Tower. Stewart had been a lad of eleven playing hand ball in the upper galleries when the *Centauria* had started its voyage. Now he was a fine strapping young man of twenty-one. It didn't seem possible . . .

"Yes?" Carston spoke into the disc.

"Hello, Davis, you old walrus. How's tricks? Hourly report: Stewart speaking."

Carston smiled. "Davis isn't here," he said. "I gave him temporary relief. This is Captain Carston." He switched on his own reflector screen.

There was a pause and Stewart's face grimaced in embarrassment at his blunder. "Oh, beg pardon, sir. I didn't . . ."

"All right, Stewart," Carston smiled again. "Go on with your report. I'll take it."

"Yes, sir. East Tower 12:15. Visibility . . . five. Sectors one, two, three, and four . . . okay. Probascope reading: zero-zero."

"All right, Stewart," acknowledged Carston. "I'll record it. Yes, what's wrong?"

On the panel, the young watch-officer's face showed some anxiety. "If you

please, sir, I'd like to have someone take my place for a few hours. My eyes have been bothering me a bit, sir."

"Scanner strain?"

"I don't think so. I seem to see streamers of white light, little pin points, that is. It's probably only a temporary condition."

Carston personally gave the order for Stewart's relief, and then sat there a moment, frowning. At twelve thirty West Tower reported in, and Carston recorded it as he had Stewart's. When the watch-officer had finished, Carston asked:

"How're your eyes, McIver?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then: "Now that you mention it, sir, they've been giving me a little trouble. Little streaks of light. I expect it will pass shortly."

By now Carston's worst fears were realized, and he went into action at once. He pulled over the mike of the P. A. system, and an instant later heard his voice go resounding over the entire drome-settlement.

"Attention! It is quite possible we are being observed by enemy craft. I want each one of you to remain calm but be ready for any emergency. The settlement is now under martial law and will remain so until further orders from Central Tower."

Twice he repeated this statement, then clicked off the mike and glanced at the general view screen. It gave him a feeling of satisfaction to see that his orders had produced no hysteria. Like a well-oiled machine the settlement dropped its civil routine and geared itself for the unexpected.

Carston remained in Central Tower three hours more, watching the wan daylight cast by Nida's distant sun slowly fade. With the coming of darkness he went down the lift to the street level, and walked the short distance to his quarters. He had left word to be called at the first sign of any trouble, but what sort of trouble did he expect? He had said 'enemy craft' but he had used that expression for mundane rationalization only. They were on the brink of the unknown. Who could tell what cosmic horrors lay out there? Or had he suddenly become over-cautious?

At eleven fifty-two a call from Central Tower brought him to that watch post on the double. He arrived to find Williamson, the night watchofficer in a state of tense excitement.

"We spotted them, sir, but so far there's only one ship. That is, I guess you could call it a ship. It's an odd looking disc with a cylinder-like midsection and at intervals it gives off a powerful light."

Carston looked through the probascope, and for a moment saw nothing but black sky and the myriads of stars that paraded through it. Then a lighter shadow focused itself in his vision, advancing toward him slowly it seemed, but at a rate which he could not even estimate.

"Where do you suppose they're from?" Williamson asked nervously.

Carston said nothing. He was thinking, curiously, of his home back on Earth and the sunlit mornings he had tramped down a dusty road with the call of a meadowlark sounding in his ears. He was thinking of green fields and red-roofed houses and the fragrant honey locust trees in blossom. Williamson's voice cut into his reverie.

"They're heading directly toward us, sir."

"Light the landing platter," Carston ordered. "Full power. Light all tower beacons."

One look at the powerful ship had convinced him that the settlement's defenses—two comparatively small ato-guns taken from the dismantled *Centauria*, one weakened warp-impinger—were inadequate and a bold move of welcoming the stranger the only alternative.

But somehow as he waited for the ship to acknowledge his signal, his mind kept reverting to the past. Ten years ago he had not had to face any emergencies such as this. He was a military man, yes, but a military man retired from active service at the age of thirty-two because of a bad left arm, caused ironically, by a fall down a flight of stairs. Then had come the *Centauria* and a recommendation for him to command by his old friend, Senator Stanley. His jaw tightened suddenly. He didn't intend to lose everything now that the project was on the verge of accomplishment. He would use trickery, cunning, diplomacy, everything at his command, if the approaching craft were hostile, and somehow he would . . . he must . . . win out.

And now the strange ship had checked its forward impetus and was hovering just above them. Gently as a falling leaf, it descended to the landing platter and came to a standstill. A drum-shaped object protruded from a trap on the side and slowly revolved while a diffused red light gleamed above it.

"Testing us for something," mused the Captain. "Perhaps they'll attack without coming out."

Presently, however, the hatch opened, a ladder was slung over the side and two figures climbed down. They were heavily encased in queer-shaped space suits with rectangular helmets. Carston, staring in the glare of the white lights, could not be sure whether or not the two figures were human, though they seemed man-size with four appendages. Three more figures climbed out,

and then the five began to move slowly, cautiously across the platter to the drome entrance chamber.

Not until then did Carston leave his post. He rode down the lift quickly and hurried across to the drome-side door. Before entering, he touched a lever on a panel, saw a dull-surfaced metal wall roll across from one side to the other effectively dividing the room into two parts. That wall was constructed of the new aluminum alloy that would permit him to see and hear everything on the opposite side of that wall and yet remain invisible to the strangers, as well as safe from any weapon discharge. He took his place in the chair behind the metal desk and waited.

A moment later the five strangers entered the chamber on the other side of the wall. They remained standing, one slightly in advance of the others. Their helmets presented a solid metal surface completely hiding their features. Carston reached out, pulled over the thought transcriber on its bracket and began to direct his thoughts into it.

"You are on an inhabited planet. As commanding officer of this settlement, I bid you welcome. Will you please state your mission and where you are from."

He was following the *Spaceways Manual* to the letter, following the paragraph which read: *In contacting any form of alien life suspected of not previously being in contact with Earthians, reveal as little about yourself as possible but attempt to elicit at once such information as will enable you to appraise those aliens with a view to a common 'esprit de corps'.*

But the leader of the strangers was likewise noncommittal. The transcriber recorded his reply,

"We have lost our way and are not sure of our present position. What planet is this and to what race do you belong?"

"Do you come from far?" Carston parried.

"From far and near. Our origin is far out in space. Will you reveal yourself, sir?"

"Where?" Carston persisted.

The strangers bent their heads together, held a consultation. At last the helmeted leader looked up. Slowly the transcriber recorded his answer.

"We come from a planet called Earth."

Earth! A pulse began to throb in Carston's temple. He stared at the transcriber, half rose in his chair while beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead. So the cycle was complete. Not *one* but *two* ships had crossed the trackless void. The expedition could now be considered a success from all

angles. Carston reached toward the panel at his side. Move back that damned wall and greet your fellow men with the warmth and hospitality they deserved. Shake their hands! Clap their backs! . . . But wait . . . !

Earthmen wore no such outlandish space suits, did not build queer disc-shaped ships like that one out on the platter. Another paragraph in the *Manual* came back to him. *In contacting aliens always establish positive identity and beware of false claims of origin. Cases have been known where outlanders learning of conditions on Earth, have attempted to pose as inhabitants of our System.* All at once Carston's brain became crystal clear, and he weighed the facts and sought the truth. The *Centauria* had landed here but five months ago. At the time of their departure from Earth no other ship capable of making such a voyage had been in process of construction. On the other hand the strangers had all the attributes of Earthmen in spite of their shapeless suits.

Far back in Carston's mind an impossible thought began to whisper for recognition. He turned to the transcriber again.

"Your place of departure on the planet, Earth, of which you speak . . . It has a name?"

"Carstonville,"

Cold sweat bathed the Captain from head to foot.

"Your date of departure?" he demanded.

"July sixth, just forty-nine days ago. Our ship is equipped with the new Ganlor Drive, of course, or this speed would not have been possible."

Behind the metal desk Carston was staring with glazed eyes. A mirthless laugh sounded in his throat.

"Ten years . . ." he muttered hoarsely. "Ten years . . ."

THE SINGLETON BARRIER

Who knows what lies beyond the wall of mist. It is a barrier through which some of us at times can only partially see.

—Gypsy Zenicaron.

At five o'clock, midway between Waconia and Victoria, the mist began. You couldn't see it coming down. But the drool on the windshield blurred vision of the way ahead despite all efforts of the wipers.

The moisture also began to play hob with the motor. There was an invisible microscopic crack in the distributor cap—he had been aware of it for weeks but had neglected to do anything about it—that shorted-out in excessive dampness and caused the motor to miss violently.

Coming into Victoria, he swung right into the Lake Bavaria road as a way to Chaska instead of the usual 41. He didn't know why he did this; the Bavaria road was longer and less traveled and in the car's condition he should by all rights have stayed to the regular route.

But he was in good spirits. Six weeks out of the hospital and his old job back had given him a new lease on life which not even the gloom of the dying day could overshadow. His name was Vance Singleton. As assistant district manager for Cosmopolitan Film Distributors he had driven from Minneapolis to Waconia to deliver personally to the Paradise Theater there a Technicolor version of *A Stack of Cards*, the British film which had snowballed in popularity the last six months. Waconia had pushed forward by two weeks the date of its Summer-Festival and the Paradise manager wanted to profit on the crowds the celebration would attract to the town. As for Chaska, the theater there had been sliding and a special mid-week delivery was aimed at bolstering its boxoffice.

The Bavaria road skirted the lake for a half mile then bisected Housman's Woods. Here it narrowed, with little if any shoulders, and the black-top was ill-kept with numerous pot holes. Under the lowering sky the mist continued.

The car was missing badly when Singleton reached the woods. With a sigh he stopped, got out, opened the hood and attempted to dry the distributor with a piece of tissue wrapped around the handle of his knife. The result was not too successful, so he removed the wires from the cap and placed it on the warm manifold, covering it with a cloth.

It was lonely there on the deserted road. The dripping woods pressed close and the screams of a solitary jay sounded unnaturally loud. Singleton lit a cigar and looked about him as he waited for the cap to dry. A few rods down the road a dented and rusty mailbox bore the name, Onquay. Beside it an overgrown path led into the woods.

As he stood there smoking he suddenly became aware of a sound filtering from the tangle of undergrowth—the muffled sound of a woman sobbing, the deep-throated crying of someone in mental anguish. He listened a moment, then strode to the path and followed it into the woods. The sobbing died away.

He saw no one. What he did see brought him up short. There was a wall running directly across the path, a wall six feet high with no sign of an opening of any kind. It was fashioned of grey brick and looked to be new. And yet old too, Singleton thought on closer inspection; in some places the mortar had worn away. The wall continued in either direction as far as the close-growing trees and underbrush permitted him to see.

Singleton listened, wondering if the sound he had heard had been a trick of his fancy. Utter silence broken only by the softly dripping trees encompassed him. He began to walk along the side of the wall, looking for a place of entry, studying the stone birds mounted at intervals of ten feet or so on the wall top. Their presence puzzled him. In contrast to the brickwork the birds were crudely carved and of a species-likeness that was questionable, though he assumed they were meant to be ravens. The placement of the bricks was ornamental too; they were laid in a kind of design not unlike some intricate parquet flooring and the design—roughly a parallelogram surmounted by a cupola and three interlocking triangles—was repeated over and over again with spaces of regular order in between. Singleton could well appreciate the work of a master mason for he had attempted to lay the brick flooring of his Shorewood residence patio and had given it up as a bad job. The man who had done the brick laying on this wall with its intricate design was just the man he was looking for.

About two hundred feet forward the wall terminated in a high truncated column which was surmounted by another stone image; a griffin Singleton

thought, though again the carving was so crude it was difficult to tell. There was a wrought iron gate here, connecting with another identical column and with a latch, heavily coated with rust.

As he stood there that same enervating sound came again. Whoever it was crying—he thought mistakenly for a moment it was the voice of a child—had apparently advanced parallel with his own movement but on the opposite side of the wall.

Singleton pressed down the latch bar; it gave protestingly and he stepped inside. There was no path here, the untrodden underbrush growing thick, glistening with moisture that quickly dampened his shoes.

The inner side of the wall presented the same parquet-like design, the same expert workmanship. There was also a small iron door in the near gate column; it stood partially open, revealing a chamber about a foot square within.

His curiosity and puzzlement now in high gear, he pulled the door wide and stared at its contents: a badly tarnished crucifix suspended from its chain, a small neatly-made wooden box filled with what appeared to be a layer of dirt, topped with a layer of thorns and what was apparently a holy-water vessel, half filled with liquid.

Singleton stood there, considering; he could advance no reason for the articles' presence here in this abandoned location. But further thought on the matter was abruptly thrust aside. A sudden scream rent the silence.

The cry from close at hand went up and up into the thick air, carrying with it the agony of a lost soul. It sent a piece of ice up Singleton's spine, brought him on the instant back to those antiseptic corridors of six months before where such mindless outpourings had been a nightly occurrence.

Then he was pushing his way through the undergrowth, calling "Yes! Yes! Where are you?"

But he saw no one. A dozen yards forward and the growth thinned perceptibly. A dozen more and he found himself in a clearing at the far side of which stood a house.

It was not a large house and, though obviously vacant, appeared in good enough repair. Only the narrow veranda which fronted it on two sides showed signs of neglect, the rusted screening hanging in ribbons like torn bandages on old wounds. The windows on the second story were boarded up with bleached lumber but those on the ground level were uncovered and curtainless. Nailed to the front door was a cross fashioned of white laths.

Singleton crossed to the veranda steps and called out again, "Is anybody here?"

Only the purling of the roof trough answered him. It's some kid prankster he told himself vaguely but even as the thought came he knew it was not so. No one could affect a cry like the one he had heard. He walked around the side of the house, pausing midway to peer into a window. There were no furnishings inside. The empty walls and empty floor—the latter coated with dust—bespoke desertion for a long time.

Reaching the back he saw that the screen-torn veranda continued here on the third exposure as well. Twenty feet from the house was a shallow depression lined with shale and here a spring bubbled forth, the run-off water disappearing into a crevice a few yards away.

For some reason the sight of the glistening fresh water aroused a thirst in Singleton's throat and he drew from his pocket a collapsible cup, knelt and filled it. He drank the full cup; then the reaction came, a bitter taste that seemed to sear the inside of his mouth. Coughing, he cursed the whim that had led him to drink untested water. And his concern was magnified when he saw what lay beyond the spring. Two graves were there, one by size apparently that of a child with a nameless wooden marker; the other partially filled with dirt and topped with a layer of dried thorn bushes.

Singleton called again. He received no reply. Shrugging, he headed back for the road.

It happened as he was closing the gate behind him. In that instant before the latch clicked shut he became aware of a flapping, shuffling as of garments caught in a sudden burst of wind. Simultaneously out of the corner of his eye he saw something white and formless dart through the gate and rush into the woods on the other side.

It might have been a girl he thought, clad in a filmy ungirthed dress with something trailing from her dark-haired head like a bridal veil. If it were a girl, she made no outcry, looked to neither side.

Singleton ran down the path in the direction the figure had taken and gained the road. No living person was in sight but his car, a friendly thing, stood waiting there before him, the door and hood open, as he had left it. With mixed thoughts crowding his mind, he took the distributor cap off the manifold, clamped it in its proper position and plugged in the wires. Then he closed the hood, got in the car and started the motor. The mist, he saw as he headed down the road, was coming down more heavily than before.

It was dark when he reached Chaska. He stopped at the Empress Theater

and delivered the cans of film and then continued haltingly—the car was missing badly again—to the town's principal garage.

"I don't stock that make of cap; it's an off size," the garage man said. "But I'm going in to Minneapolis in the morning and I should be back by eleven. I can pick up a new cap, check the rest of the ignition system, clean the points, and have the car ready for you about noon."

Singleton nodded and noted the motel with a "vacancy" sign across the street.

"Are there any masons in town?" he asked then. "Good ones, that is? I've got a place over in Shorewood and I need a man to lay a floor in my patio. Not just a plain job. I want something fancy."

"You might try Joe Paldon. He owned the brick kilns here ten years ago before he went out of business."

Singleton handed him the car key. "By the way," he said, "I saw a wall that was nicely done down on the Bavaria road. Who did that?"

The garage man looked up quickly then turned his eyes away. He made no reply.

"It's back in the woods," Singleton persisted. "Near a vacant house. You must know the place."

"Onquay," the garage man said, repeating the name Singleton had seen on the mailbox. "Peter Onquay. He lives on the other side of the road now."

"Why did he move?" It was an idle question and he expected an idle answer. Instead the garage man's face flushed and contorted into an expression of intense hatred. He dropped the tire-iron he was holding and his hands trembled perceptibly as he bent to retrieve it.

"Who're you?" he demanded. "One of them damned reporters? They hashed that over ten years ago."

Taken aback by the vehemence of the query, Singleton answered that he had nothing to do with the press and added somewhat sharply that the matter didn't make any difference to him one way or another.

But he had unwittingly tapped a reservoir. The man began to talk rapidly and all the while the flush in his face became deeper, flecked with beads of perspiration. "... he killed her ..." he said. "He killed her, in spite of what the court said. But she deserved to be killed. She was a gypsy."

"Who ... Onquay?" Singleton was somewhat confused. The man fell silent as if he had already said too much. "Onquay married a gypsy woman," he said after a moment. "She disappeared and there was talk she had murdered her first child by incantations. But," he shrugged, "that was ten years ago."

It was apparent the man did not wish to discuss the matter further. In compliance Singleton turned to go. "Oh, one thing," he said, turning back. "That wall I spoke of. The bricks were laid in a design like parquet. Did Onquay do that?"

The man looked away. "Not parquet," he said. "A *lesangre*."

"What's that?"

But the man was striding away toward the rear of his shop.

Strange dreams were no oddity with Singleton. A year ago they had been bad, occurring almost every night and sometimes, when he was tired, during the daylight hours. Usually they followed a pattern. For three or four nights running he might be abandoned on a vast bog with little grey rodents gathering all about him, making ready to attack. Again he would be traversing a high road of incredible loneliness, marching slowly with the brain-gnawing knowledge that some mewling horror followed him close behind.

Tonight his dream was different. The odd part about it was that he was aware in a detached sort of way that it was a dream from which he would awaken to reality. He was in the dripping woods of the Lake Bavaria road and he was standing at the edge of the clearing directly in front of the two graves. And this was the horror of it. Lying in the bottom of the partially filled grave was a woman alive. Her raven black hair was long and abundant, reaching to her waist. Even as Singleton watched, she moved with a soft outcry, climbing out of the grave and began to crawl across the wet grass toward him.

He awoke at this part of the sequence, bathed in perspiration. He got out of bed, filled and drank a glass of water and moved to the window, still upset from the experience in his sleep. The night was dark and his eyes moved automatically to the circle of radiance from an arc light across the street from the motel. At the edge of the circle his car stood in the garage driveway where it had been left, the garage being filled. The interior of the car was half in light, half in shadow, and as he looked Singleton fancied he saw a woman sitting motionless in the rear seat.

He opened the window to get an unrestricted view. But when he looked again there was no one there.

He awoke in the morning to find the motel in a state of excitement. The manager's daughter who served as chambermaid and office attendant had been found unconscious near the cabin where she slept. She had been struck over the head with a heavy blunt instrument. Singleton gave her a tranquilizer which he always carried and while waiting for the doctor bathed her head with

cold water. The girl was a pretty thing and he was incensed at the wantonness and violence of the attack.

When things quieted, he walked to the coffee shop for his breakfast. There by luck he found Jeff Purdom, the former brick kiln man the garage man had advised him to see. Purdom, who needed a shave and a comb, made the same comment when Singleton broached the subject of the wall.

"Not parquetry though in my time I have seen some intricate floor patterns," he said. "That design on the wall is a *lesangre*."

Singleton waited for him to continue.

"Lesangre . . . a Romany device to protect against the Evil-eye."

"Witchcraft!" said Singleton. "But surely no one believes . . ."

"Outwardly, no. But the fact remains that Onquay married a gypsy woman and had by her two children, one of whom died under mysterious circumstances. Then the woman disappeared and Onquay was arrested, largely on the basis of two graves found on his property. He claimed the graves were empty, that they were for memory purposes only. They were dug open and it was found he told the truth.

"Onquay is a queer duck. He was a spiritist and after he married that gypsy woman he mixed his beliefs with the legends and superstitions of the Romany tribe. After his wife disappeared he shut up the house and moved into his rental property across the road with his daughter who is a congenital idiot. He bought bricks from me when I was operating the kilns and he built the wall as a protection he said from the powers of his gypsy wife. Oh, Onquay is a queer one all right but he's a damned good mason. I wouldn't go traipsin' around there if I were you."

At noon Singleton picked up his car and headed back for Minneapolis via the Bavaria road. A short time later found him approaching the Onquay property. He stopped and this time entered the trees on the near side of the road.

There were no woods here. Beyond the narrow fringe of trees the way before him opened into a wide expanse dotted with many stumps, grey and aging, the trees cut down a long time ago, no effort made to clear the land completely. There was a nondescript box-like house about a hundred yards ahead, smaller than the abandoned house across the road, and smoke was filtering out of its chimney. As Singleton approached a young girl who had been seated at the window, rose and darted out of sight. He climbed the steps, knocked on the door which almost immediately was opened by a grey-haired man of massive proportions.

"Mr. Onquay?"

The man nodded and motioned Singleton inside.

"Mr. Onquay, I've got a house over in Shorewood and I'm building a little patio—nothing elaborate—and I want a floor laid of ornamental brick . . . something fancy, you know. I saw your wall across the road and I liked the design of it. Would you be interested in doing a job for me that . . .?"

"You keep away from that wall!" Onquay spewed out the words like vitriol, his face twisting with anger. "That's private property. Keep away. You hear?"

Singleton was abashed. "I'm sorry I trespassed. But . . ." Onquay's anger gave way abruptly to a spell of quiet. "Didn't mean to blow my top," he said. "I've been troubled with some wild village boys lately. They're liable to get hurt climbin' on that wall, and then it would be my fault. I have trouble enough keepin' my daughter outa there."

Now that he had started, he talked on as if he were starved for conversation. Singleton twice interrupted to mention the subject that had brought him here but Onquay continued, apparently without listening.

Afterward Singleton recalled that at no one moment did he become aware of his surroundings. He was in an old-fashioned parlor, replete with horsehair furniture, old chromos on the walls and marble-topped tables. He saw it on the floor first . . . a design in the flooring strips, a parallelogram surmounted by a cupola and three interlocking triangles . . . *the lesangre* . . . Then he saw the same design had been marked with crayon on the walls, also painted with unsteady brush marks on the half-drawn window shades. It had even been traced with acid on the glass of the chandelier. As he stood staring at these symbols Singleton felt an atmosphere about the house, definite and alien, a sense of defense as if the structure were a crumbling fortress, vainly gathering about it bastions to thwart an unseen enemy.

"Sorry I can't help you," Onquay said. "My time is pretty well taken up here."

Singleton turned to go but his attention was drawn to a glass-doored bookcase by the near wall. He stepped closer to read the title of an ancient volume: Verstigan's *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*. The lower shelves were filled with a complete set of the Countess Zurka's cheap Gothic novels, *Trail of the Evil Eye*, *Stolen Earrings*, *Gypsy Revenge*, *Romany Retribution*, *Secret of the Nomads*. There was also a well worn copy of the banned *Gypsy Zenicaron*.

Singleton looked with new interest at the man before him. Then he became

aware of the smell of cheap perfume and saw in the connecting doorway a young girl with black hair and wide-set vacant eyes.

"My daughter, Miola," Onquay said. "Say hello to the gentleman, Miola."

Clad in a faded dress, the girl stood there in silence, lips twisted in a mindless grin.

There was something depressing about the house, about Onquay and his daughter and a few minutes later Singleton took his leave.

In his Shorewood home he went over the plans for his patio. In spite of what he said it was to be quite elaborate with a miniature fountain in its center and several large size planters around its outer rim. Singleton was quite aware that his enthusiasm for it was predicated on the loss of his wife who had packed up and left him shortly after his release from the hospital. But after the close community life in that institution he welcomed the solitude.

At his film office the next day he received a phone call from the manager of the Chaska theater. Box office receipts had dropped to an all-time low, the manager reported. He needed a program change for the coming weekend. Something special.

With his free hand Singleton flipped the card file. "I can give you a class A comedy with Bartlett and Erippen," he said. "*Last Night Girl*, a third week release. Jefferies over in Watertown did full house with it on a three night stand. With it we suggest *East of Cambodia*, a timely travelogue, in color of course. And a Charmly cartoon."

The Chaska manager accepted and Singleton promised personal delivery, no trucks making that run the next day. In the morning he loaded the cans of film in his car and headed out.

He enjoyed the autumn countryside and was not aware of his turning off the highway but he must have done so, for presently he found himself driving down the Bavaria road, slowing down as he approached the Onquay property. The woods were still a brilliant green under the bright fall sun. Jay birds, by two's and fours, rose up screaming as he stopped the car. He took a notebook and a pencil out of the glove compartment and headed down the path into the woods. Asked for a reason for his presence here, he would have said he wanted to copy the design on the wall which had so fascinated him. But he knew it was more than that. He wanted to see again that will-o'-the-wisp figure in white who had fluttered out of nowhere.

The wall rose up before him. Singleton turned in the opposite direction from the gate and began to follow along the base. Fifty feet forward he stopped and made a careful copy of the wall's design on a page of his

notebook. A few yards beyond, the bricks of the wall, severely weathered, had broken away. In one place erosion had made an opening through to the opposite side. Singleton put his eye to this aperture. At first he saw nothing, then trees and underbrush seemed to fade away and a clearing opened before his gaze. Square topped ornamental wagons drawn up in a rude circle swam into view. A group of horses stood tethered to a line stretched between two trees. Between the wagons a campfire blazed under a tripod supporting a blackened kettle. Men and women with kerchiefed heads and earrings in their lobes stood frozen in various forms of activity as if imprisoned in a single panel of motion picture film. But like a painted postcard the Romany camp bore the mark of unreality, rigid, garish, too bright in color.

The scene faded. The wagons and the horses and the gypsies melted away and the trees and underbrush came back once again.

Singleton left the opening and went back along the wall until he reached the gate. A heavy branch was propped against the grillwork, apparently to discourage intruders. A freshly painted sign read: *Keep Out*.

Without compunction Singleton heaved the branch aside, opened the gate and passed through. It seemed that the moment he entered, the sky darkened and a thin film of moisture began to fall. Once again he turned left and began to follow along the wall to the end column and the broken hole in the brickwork. But there was no sign of the Romany camp he had seen there a moment before.

He turned back but halted again before he had taken a dozen steps. No vegetation grew close to the wall; there was a space about two feet in width of soft mire moistened by recent rains. As he looked he thought he saw a shape form in the wet earth, what seemed the print of a woman's foot. A second print slowly formed a pace ahead as if an invisible woman were walking along the side of the wall. The footprints continued to the gate. There again he heard that shuffling and thought he glimpsed something white flow through the opening and vanish in the wood.

Singleton ran down the path to the road. As he emerged from the bushes he saw two figures by the mailbox. Figures in reality this time. Peter Onquay and his daughter, Miola.

The girl stood grinning vacuously as her father opened the box. There was no mail. Onquay turned and without a word of recognition strode across the road and vanished amid the trees. Like an obedient dog, the girl followed.

Singleton got into his car and continued to Chaska.

In Chaska, his business attended to, he drove around town a while, then

stopped in a tavern off the main street. He felt confused, tired and in need of a stimulant. The man behind the bar answered his question.

"The Onquays?" he said. "Sure I know 'em. And I know that wall too. I wouldn't go near it for all the tea in China."

"Why not?"

He halted his glass-polishing. "It's not the wall itself; it's what's behind it. Some things are better not spoken of."

Three hours later when Singleton left the tavern, weary and still ill at ease, he found himself beset by an almost overwhelming desire for sleep. He drove his car to the town's outskirts and parked on a back street and with all the ease of his hospital days dozed off.

He awoke as the last rays of the autumn sun were dropping into the bottomland. He started the car and headed back for his Shorewood home. But he was aware that his hands trembled a little as he swung into the Bavaria road. And now a feeling of urgency possessed him. He drove fast and recklessly until the Onquay property loomed ahead. He didn't know why he was here. He only knew that a strange magnetic attraction urged him on, a desire to see again that wall and the land beyond it.

Yet when he came within sight of the wall it appeared disappointingly commonplace, simply a greyish barrier of bricks and mortar. Once again he passed through the gate into the silent world beyond.

It was now almost dusk and the mist had started again. The moisture penetrated his coat, began to drip from the brim of his hat. He reached the clearing and the vacant house, walked around the veranda and came abreast of the two graves. As he stood there looking out on the mound and the other partially-filled opening, the flanking trees and bushes did not change but a second scene became superimposed over the first like a misplaced negative. There was the same circle of ornamental wagons he had seen through the aperture in the wall.

Then he saw something else. A woman lay in the partially-filled grave, a woman familiar with strangely youthful features, with wide-open eyes and black hair that reached to her waist. Yet the outlines of her figure were vague and indistinct. She climbed slowly out of the grave and began to crawl through the long grass toward him.

With a kind of mesmeric insight Singleton felt sure that the woman was Onquay's Romany wife who had practiced her witchcraft and taken the life of their child. And with that same insight he thought he knew how her power had been imprisoned by the counter-power of that wall. It was the evil of

which she was a symbol that reached out for him with clawing hands as she crawled across the clearing.

Suddenly he could restrain himself no longer. With a choking cry he drew his knife and hurled himself toward her.

In night darkness with only the glow of the illuminated dash his car was an island surrounded by the silent woods. For an hour he had sat there motionless while the mist formed silver beads that ran down the windshield, while a latent horror like a small animal crouched and grew in his brain, awaiting recognition. At his side on the upholstered seat lay his knife, stained and clotted with blood.

From far off he heard a man's voice—Onquay's voice—calling:
"Miola! Miola! Where are you, Miola?"

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CARL JACOBI

Carl Jacobi (1908-) is a native of Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he still lives. His first stories were published while he was a student at the University of Minnesota, *Moss Island* as a graduate's contribution to *The Quest of Central High*, and *Mive* in *The Minnesota Quarterly*. Both stories were later sold to *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales* respectively and marked his debut in professional magazines.

He joined the editorial staff of *The Minnesota Quarterly*, and after graduation in 1931 became a news reporter for the *Minneapolis Star*, as well as a frequent reviewer of books and plays.

He has written scores of tales for all the best known magazines of fantasy and science fiction, and is represented in numerous anthologies of imaginative fiction published in the U.S., England, and New Zealand. His stories have been translated into French, Swedish, Danish, and Dutch.

After years with the *Minneapolis Star*, he went on to become editor of *Midwest Media*, an advertising and radio trade journal, but now devotes all his time to writing.

Carl Jacobi owns his own private retreat, a cabin at Minnewashta in the Carver county outlands of Minneapolis. His intimate familiarity with the terrain and environment there have provided the setting for many of his most distinguished stories.

He continues to maintain his status in the enviable elite class of lifelong bachelors.

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